

DOCTORAL THESIS

Performance Of Wit(h)nessing Trauma and Affect in Contemporary Live Art

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Performance Of Wit(h)nessing: Trauma and Affect in Contemporary Live Art

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates traumatic affectivity and a complex mesh of artistic strategies in contemporary live art and performance that allow a certain material renegotiation and transformation of social and personal traumatic histories. These strategies are analysed not as means of interpersonal transmission of experience through narrative capture and consolation, but of a transmission of affect, where the sense of affective sharing, of ‘wit(h)nessing’ and ‘transmissibility’ of (traumatic) affect is distinguished from the idea of identification, of mirroring, of emotional identification that in fact subsumes the other to the same, to a life as we can readily articulate and regulate it without needing to acknowledge the violence inherent in such articulations. The thesis also explores how the notion of dramaturgy changes when observed from the perspective of trauma. Dramaturgy is here understood as ‘the text (the weave) of the performance’, where performance is seen to encompass a wide range of artistic practices which involve some element of live or recorded performed action. Such definition of dramaturgy becomes especially significant when this text/weave is marked by a traumatic occurrence, which by definition damages, tears down its integrating fabric. How can we address the difficulty, physically and philosophically, of accessing a destructive event through a creative act? As one possible answer, the thesis proposes the notion of ‘dramaturgies of loss’, of a certain ‘melancholy’ or ‘traumatic’ text as a creative answer to the forces of violence. It argues that an awkward, uncomfortable presence of certain misplaced, ‘emptied’ mimetic forms of contemporary dance and performance can be seen to create a parallel topography that can retroact on accepted notions of culture and render what belongs inside or outside of the cultural sphere indeterminate and thus potentially open to change.

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Chapter One

Affect and Auto/ethnography in Performance

My main focus in the thesis will be on the specific possibilities and difficulties involved in making and theorising contemporary performance work that engages with social and personal trauma while complicating links between affectivity and biographical and narrative aspects of relating (to) traumatic events. I hope to analyse and develop this complexity without either relying on, or renouncing the chosen performance works' immersion in either biographical or narrative structures that inevitably shape any conscious engagement with (traumatic) affects. Rather than positing biography and narrative as opposite to some idea of an entirely unconscious affectivity, I hope to work through questioning the presumed and perceived self-containment and coherence of biographical and narrative structures of experience, as well as questioning the assumed 'unintelligence' of affectivity. I will test out these relations between narrative and affect as parallel to how text relates to the body in performance, and examine other possibilities for how links between biography, narrative and affect may be shaped and theorised in the context of art and performance that engages with traumatic experience, content and affectivity somewhat paradoxically through an articulate materiality of its making and a certain impossibility of its script.

The recent 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences, inspired by the focus on the body in feminist theory and by an exploration of emotions in queer theory, has introduced an important change of perspective in the theorising of the mind-body relations. As Michael Hardt reminds us in his Foreword to *The Affective Turn* collection of essays, to think body and mind, and reason and passions, through affects requires a synthesis, as affects belong equally to both sides of these paired and often contrasted

phenomena. Affects thus offer us a complex view of causality between mind and body, and reason and passion, demonstrating ‘both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers.’¹

My thesis will engage the notion of affectivity mainly through psychoanalysis, especially in its feminist interpretations, through what Teresa Brennan proposes about the transmission of affect:² that just as our individual subjectivities are cultural and historical constructs and are not self-sufficient and self-contained, so is our affectivity shared and ‘transmitted’ between what we consider our sovereign bodies, emotions and energies. Affect is defined in Brennan’s analysis as ‘the physiological shift accompanying a judgment,’³ where her emphasis is clearly on the fact that such physiological shifts, such affective bodily changes should be understood as having an ‘intelligence’ of their own, as ‘intentional unconscious processes capable of being reconnected with conscious ones.’⁴ The intervention Brennan wishes to make concerns a certain acknowledgment and awareness of a ‘horizontal’ transmission of affectivity, not simply a ‘vertical’, generational and genetic passing on of affects and character traits, or even of social memory or of culture, but of the transmission that happens here and now, and brings with it an awareness and heightened responsibility before the complex possibilities of personal and social affective relating. The political stakes of such an affective intervention into the rules and potential for personal and social interaction belong with a wider theoretical effort to identify and problematise the unacknowledged lines of separation between our bodies and our politics, as distinguished for example in Giorgio Agamben’s theorising of *homo sacer* that takes up the difference in classical Greek language and philosophy between natural life and political

¹ Michael Hardt, ‘Foreword: What Affects Are Good For,’ in Patricia Ticineto Clough, Jean O’Malley Halley (eds), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007, p. ix.

² Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004.

³ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

existence – between ‘*zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group’⁵ – to argue that *zoē* still remains present in our individual and social lives only by its exclusion. This exclusion happens by operations of sovereign power, which thus shows itself as an order of political existence in which power is in fact established exactly by creating and maintaining a (policed) border between the biological and the political, through marking out a space of bare life deprived of the protection of the law, a form of life identified by Agamben in the figure of *homo sacer*, ‘[a]n obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [...] solely in the form of its exclusion,’⁶ through the fact that *homo sacer* was both implicated and totally excluded from the law as someone who ‘*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*’.⁷ Agamben develops this argument, following Walter Benjamin, by questioning the very idea of sacredness of life, seen as a crucial ethical value to be protected by modern democratic societies, to show the links between the notion of sacredness and the idea of the sacrifice. Agamben reminds us that in classical Greece, from which we derive the majority of our ethical and political concepts, life in itself was not seen as having any value at all, and sacrifice was the very ritual that gave value to that life by separating it from its profane context, from *zoē* as the simple fact of living common to all living beings.⁸ Showing how this unacknowledged separation leaves our political and social ethics continually prone to violence to life, so much so that he proposes that in contemporary politics perhaps ‘we are all virtually *homines sacri*’;⁹ Agamben suggests that we still have to formulate a politics able

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 9.

⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷ Ibid., emphasis in original.

⁸ Cf. Ibid., p. 42.

⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

to move beyond, or rather move *with* the difficult zones of indistinction between biology and politics, between law and fact, a politics able to intervene in the catastrophe of the present situation where ‘a law that seeks to transform itself wholly into life is more and more confronted with a life that has been deadened and mortified into juridical rule’.¹⁰ I see Brennan’s theorising of the transmission of affect as a certain limited but significant contribution to the opening of the potential for such a politics, and develop it through my research at the intersections of the field of trauma studies and feminism, where it opens a possibility to acknowledge and learn to articulate a certain material intelligence of life as *zoē* exactly in the situations where it seems most definitely severed from *bios* as an articulated and regulated, self-aware and self-contained, ordered form of life.

Within the limited scope of my research into trauma, these possibilities of theorising the transmission of affect are developed above all through a sustained analysis of a certain significant shift this theorising allows in the notion of witnessing and its affective registers, from the hope for an ethics of conscious seeing / and / saying to the acknowledgement that the distancing power of witness inevitably leaves behind a traumatic reminder. This invites advocacy of an affective politics of *wit(h)nessing* in art, a notion proposed by the psychoanalyst, artist and feminist theorist Bracha Ettinger to address an important shift in contemporary art:

In art [...] we are moving from phantasm to trauma. Contemporary aesthetics is moving from phallic structure to matrixial sphere. We are carrying [...] enormous traumatic weight, and aesthetic wit(h)nessing in art brings its awareness to culture’s surface.¹¹

As a heightened and elaborate articulation of an aspect of affective transmissibility, Ettinger’s theorising of aesthetic wit(h)nessing brings together a promise of such a new

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

¹¹ Bracha Ettinger, ‘Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze: From Phantasm to Trauma, from Phallic Structure to Matrixial Sphere’, *parallax*, 2001, vol. 7, no. 4: 89–114 (108).

politics with the complexity of the role of traumatic affect in our culture/s, and points to some possible ways for artistic practice to articulate these difficult junctures.

The notion of wit(h)nessing is linked to another, key notion in Ettinger's theorising, that of the matrixial subjectivity. Ettinger defines the matrix on the model of the intrauterine feminine / pre-natal encounter, on the fact of the female corpo-real difference. Matrix allows for the corporeality of the womb and foetus, gestation and pregnancy to enter psychoanalytic discourse, and she theorises this difference 'both as a subjective dimension or [the matrixial] stratum of subjectivization, as a psychic sphere, and as "feminine" spanning the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic – this hypothesis does not relate to women only.'¹²

[M]atrix I understand as a psychic creative borderspace of encounter; *metramorphosis*, as a psychic creative borderlink; and the *matrixial stratum of subjectivization* reveals subjectivity as an encounter of co-emerging elements through metramorphosis.¹³

For Ettinger, matrix as a notion enables theorising of the feminine not as forever receding and unavailable but as a 'stratum of subjectivization', a 'psychic sphere' to which we can, or indeed must become re-attuned. Matrixial sphere of subjectivity is linked to the notion of the matrixial encounter, what Ettinger describes as the porous matrixial borderspaces between what we conceive of as our individual subjectivities. This porousness allows for a transgressive sharing of affects and memory traces and a 'trembling of meaning'¹⁴ that brings the awareness of trauma to the surface of culture. It describes the affective operations that destabilise the petrified image of a traumatic encounter without either falling into a psychotic total exposure or retracting into a mystical absence. It distracts the persistent traumatic clinging to a fixed, iconic (negative) 'memory' that is in fact so

¹² Idem, 'Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2004, vol. 21, no. 1: 69–93 (75).

¹³ Idem, 'Metramorphic Borderlines and Matrixial Borderspace', in John C. Welchman, *Rethinking Borders*, London: Macmillan, 1996, pp. 125–159 (125).

¹⁴ Idem, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 87.

telling of our very impossibility of remembering. Art is in a unique position to bring that awareness of trauma into the realm of the visible and the speakable through a certain work with the unknowing, with the ‘unthoughtful-knowledge on the borderline,’¹⁵ carefully undoing the appeal to retain an image of what happened, to fix our histories, so prevalent across our different cultures, which in effect intentionally or unwittingly invites survivors to remain locked inside the symptom, inside the fixation of traumatic memory, in an understandable but deceptive urge to take their share of responsibility in transmitting this supposed ‘knowledge’ of trauma as history to a younger generation that did not have direct access to it. The transgressive quality of such a vision of art blurs the distinction between what comes from with-in and from with-out, it is ‘an *ensemble* of psychic events woven through encounter, wrapped with affects and memory traces.’¹⁶ This challenges artists to place their work with-in and yet remain with-out the radical break between trauma and culture that is often acknowledged in trauma studies in the context of the paradoxical silencing of the victim by the very nature of cultural and social discourses.

Another line of theorising of affect in art that I have pursued in my research concerns what the art theorist and historian Jill Bennett in her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* articulates as the need to establish ‘a framework that challenges the nexus between art and experience and a realist aesthetics: a framework that distinguishes the kind of inquiry that art might instantiate from the idea that art is a vehicle for the interpersonal transmission of experience.’¹⁷ Although this could be read as a contrary argument to both Brennan and Ettinger, what Bennett in fact argues is exactly for analyses of art and trauma to ‘focus more sharply on affect itself, extracting the affective

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁷ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 6–7.

encounter from generalized accounts of emotional identification.¹⁸ She sees this as a way to move away from a realist aesthetics that ‘sits uneasily with a politics of testimony. [...] Such a politics requires of art not a faithful translation of testimony; rather, it calls upon art to exploit its own unique capacities to contribute actively to this politics.’¹⁹

Once again, affect is separated from emotion and the sense of affective sharing, of transmissibility of affect is distinguished from the idea of identification, of mirroring. This distinction challenges art to be just such a vehicle, not of an interpersonal transmission of experience but of a transmission of affect, of the disassociation of affect from emotion, a way out of the illusion of emotional identification that in fact subsumes the other to the same, to life as we can already articulate and regulate it without needing to acknowledge the violence inherent in these articulations.

My research has been consistently guided by a commitment to establish the parameters for such a framework that would challenge ‘the nexus between art and experience, and a realist aesthetics’ in the context of these highly charged themes and to the degree that this is possible within the limits of a thesis. I address some aspects of what such a politics of testimony may mean from the point of view of making and theorising performance. In this, much of the thesis follows the trajectory of the poststructuralist rethinking of referentiality in art and argues against the tendency to see indirectness of reference and the problems this creates in accessing our own and others’ histories as politically and ethically paralysing.²⁰

I will be engaging with this indirectness of reference throughout the thesis, but would like to emphasise above all some of the more ‘technical’ reasons behind the ineffectiveness

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁰ Cf. Cathy Caruth, ‘Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History’ in Jonathan D. Culler (ed.), *Deconstruction, critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*, London, New York: Routledge, 2003, vol. 3, pp. 201–212.

and methodological misplacement of suppositions of any simple ‘translatability’ of experience into art. The first such ‘technical’ problem with the proposition that art may be seen as a vehicle for sharing experience consists in a certain illusion about the fixity of form, and the resulting need to bring experience into art as content, as what Bennett, following Dominick LaCapra, terms the ‘aboutness’ of art, which would then, in and of itself, given the right (i.e. fixed) form, provide us with an artistic testimony. Such commonly held belief about the fixity of form, as Brian Massumi has argued,²¹ is an assumption both about perception and about art. We are human animals highly trained in stabilising our perception so that we can organise our dynamic reality into shapes and objects that enable us to intervene in it in increasingly sophisticated ways, which provide us with a sense of mastery over its unstable forms. However, perception itself is never static in this sense, it does not involve capturing of a docile, external, static reality but is always both real and abstract, always including a surplus of movement in what appears as a static, external form. We can extend Massumi’s argument to narrativity, and to biography as a particular form of narration of a life as *bios* in Agamben’s terms, to argue that narrative is similarly an illusional container for our experience, for an experience of history that is in fact even more dynamic than perception, even fuller of potential, as its surplus of movement involves not just the surplus of movement in what we designate as our present reality, but also a surplus of movement in time, which further complicates its dynamic.

This brings me to the second major ‘technical’ problem with understanding art as a vehicle for transmitting experience, and that is a similar supposition about the static nature of truth. The problematic nature of such a view of truth is perhaps best exemplified in trauma understood as the crucial notion in analysing the surplus in the temporal

²¹ Brian Massumi, ‘The Thinking-Feeling of what Happens: A Semblance of a Conversation’, *Inflexions*, May 2008, vol. 1, no. 1 ‘How is Research-Creation’: 3. Online access, available HTTP: <http://www.inflexions.org/volume_4/n1_massumihtml.html>.

dynamic of our relating (to) our histories. Literary theorist and critic Cathy Caruth, one of the key thinkers in the field of trauma research, argues that the traumatic, as the missing and missed mark of violence in consciousness, is vital in addressing history. The challenge, according to Caruth, is: 'to ask how we can listen to trauma beyond its pathology for the truth that it tells us, and how we might perhaps find a way of learning to express this truth beyond the painful repetitions of traumatic suffering.'²² Although Caruth speaks of the *truth* of trauma, in art, just as in testimony, this truth will never be a fixed, narrative or representational truth, due to the temporally disjuncted and belated nature of traumatic experience, which the trauma theory argues is never fully known as it occurs. Once again, as with the supposed fixity of perception, an understanding of truth that would imply a certain reversibility of time, the backwards-and-forwards movement in linear time as a necessary condition for a historicist sense of history as given, as contained and containable, becomes highly problematic in the light of trauma. What truth may imply in this light is rather what Bennett terms, after Massumi, "a shock to thought": a jolt that does not so much *reveal* truth as thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry'.²³

Trauma (Greek for wound), a term introduced in contemporary theory most importantly by Sigmund Freud, is a notion borrowed from medicine and elaborated throughout Freud's writing in contexts ranging from hysteria to accident and war neuroses. The strange quality of trauma as an 'experience of pain'²⁴ of an injured psyche has since been examined by psychoanalysis and by psychiatry as 'the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but

²² Cathy Caruth, Preface in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. vii–viii.

²³ Jill Bennett, *Emphatic Vision*, p. 11, emphasis in original (Cf. Brian Massumi, 'Introduction: Like a thought' in Brian Massumi (ed.), *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, London, New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. xiii–xxxix).

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. under the editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. 24 vols. London: Hogarth, 1953–1974, vol. 1, p. 359.

return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.²⁵ With the growing awareness of the scale of such violent events the notion of trauma has in the last several decades become topical among a wide range of experts, from psychiatrists, physicians, therapists, neurobiologists, brain researchers, sociologists, political thinkers, philosophers, historians and art and literary critics. From the extensive research into trauma, I have benefited most from what have become known as the post-Holocaust psychoanalytic and literary theories of testimony and witness, developed most importantly in the works of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dory Laub, but also the work of Robert Jay Lifton, Elaine Scarry, and others; and even the writing of Ettinger can to some extent be said to belong to this field, however provisionally marked the field itself may be.

From the complex and wide-ranging implications of the theories and analyses of trauma that I engage in the thesis, I have started from the striking specificity of trauma in which it is the truth of experience, rather than its distortion, that ‘forms the center of its pathology or symptoms; it is not a pathology, that is, of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself.’²⁶ This history, happening ‘as a symptom,’²⁷ is a paradoxical occurrence in which ‘the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it,’²⁸ the weight of its impact marked by the vastness of the gap that it leaves behind, by a complete lack of registration; instead of memory, this history leaves a void, a tear in consciousness; it remains an alien, inaccessible and unassumable event,²⁹ a record yet to be made.³⁰

²⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 91.

²⁶ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 5.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁹ For a phenomenological analysis of the terms ‘unassumable’ and ‘unassumability’ in relation to suffering, see: Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’, *Entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 78–97.

³⁰ Cf. Dori Laub, cited by Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 6.

This paradoxical nature of truth in trauma has a far more technical aspect to it, medically defined as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and as such calls for some reservation as PTSD may be understood as a problematic attempt to 'locate' violence and to fix the definition of trauma. The diagnosis of PTSD, introduced partly for practical reasons in order to support former US soldiers who fought in Vietnam and consequently suffered severe traumatic symptoms, is now often contested as a product of a Western psychiatry with all the problems and biases that this involves, including the highly individualist approaches to trauma and a 'universalising' gesture by which the methods of Western forms of therapy are imposed onto non-Western societies.³¹ I have been aware of these critiques and reservations throughout my research but have found no argument convincing enough as to compel me to make such clear distinctions between some supposedly contaminated Western form of therapy, and the pristine, non-Western forms of engagement with trauma. Whereas I have personally experienced the profound effects certain forms of meditation and movement work have on the affective 'knots' of trauma, and the precision with which they are able to locate these blind spots through direct work on / with the body; in terms of this particular research into trauma, I have found the 'Western' theorising of the belatedness of history, of the uncomfortable, impossible cohabitation of traumatic 'anti'-memory and consciousness, as equally profound and precise in its engagement with trauma, although in the highly different registers of language and of analysis.

The 'separation' that feels far more pertinent in this context is one that distinguishes between the notion of historical trauma relating to overwhelming events and experiences which may afflict us in the course of our lives, and another aspect of trauma that is in fact

³¹ Cf. Patrick, J. Bracken, 'Hidden Agendas: Deconstructing PTSD', in Patrick, J. Bracken and Celia Petty (eds), *Rethinking the Trauma of War*, London and New York: Free Association Books, 1998, pp. 38–59.

indistinguishable from these afflictions yet it is theoretically distinct. It is the notion of structural trauma, theorised in psychoanalytical tradition as a series of inevitable events that mark and form our subjectivity: 'Trauma as event concerns the series of losses which mark and by which subjectivity is formed: birth, loss of the breast, castration and loss of the loved object as well as the primal scene, and/or seduction.'³² The distinction between the structural and historical trauma is itself something established only after the facts, as the historical trauma acts as a trigger, as an actualisation of the hitherto virtual status of structural trauma that is sealed in primary repression and, as Freud would argue, entirely inaccessible to subjectivity. Feminist theorist and visual arts scholar Griselda Pollock, whose careful distinguishing of the two aspects of trauma I have presented and analysed here, emphasises the importance of a structural understanding of trauma as 'the pre-human condition of human becoming beyond / before / beneath fantasy and thought where a not-yet conscious becoming-human, living being, nonetheless garners the constant impact of its weakly or sometimes un-differentiated inner and outer worlds',³³ a description highly evocative of the notion of life as *zoē*, and an affirmation of the fact that it is only through an understanding of such pre-human condition that we can fully grasp the importance and the consequences of traumatic events of our histories, as well as of our own archaic foundations. Pollock points to a common misunderstanding whereby the theorising of the traumatic foundations of subjectivity is interpreted to be a proposition about a certain 'phylogenetic or collective trauma',³⁴ whereas such theorising in fact emphasises the dual structure of trauma, whereby historical trauma is an event in time, yet an event that falls out of time into the no-time of structural trauma.

³² Griselda Pollock, 'Art/Trauma/Representation', *parallax*, 2009, vol. 15, no. 1: 40–54 (43).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

This dual structure of trauma has been reflected in the composition of this thesis in the sense that it begins and for the most part continues as an analysis of the different notions linked to historical trauma, both as a collective and an individual experience, but in its concluding chapters shifts the focus increasingly to the structural trauma and to feminine subjectivity, which is seen both as a layer of subjectivity and as a movement out of the phallic dimension of trauma as ‘perpetually present (no-time) and absent (non-space)’³⁵ into a complex dynamic spacetime of an ethical encounter and of wit(h)nessing. This structure of the thesis reflects the fact that I have in the process of this research likewise found that historical trauma has been my only way to approach the outlines of what an engagement with structural trauma may involve, both theoretically and as a creative engagement.

The examples of performance and art works I will analyse in the thesis likewise follow such structuring of my research, beginning with works that explicitly engage particular highly charged and traumatic social events and practices, such as the practice of interrogation bordering on torture by the US military that I will analyse in the work of the performance artist Coco Fusco, and the contested history of the Second World War people’s liberation movement in Belgrade, Serbia, that is re-visited in the work of the artist Milica Tomić. Although both artists work with these events and practices in much detail and through media that approach historical or judicial forms of research (use of documentary recordings, recorded interviews, etc.), their forms above all consist of a certain (deceptively) simple act of placement as a mode of addressing these histories, which I will analyse as a paradigmatic placement further on in the thesis through Agamben’s lecture on the paradigm. The next set of examples will focus around some more anecdotal experiences and reflections, concluded with analyses of two contemporary works by artists

³⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

Tanja Ostojić and Emily Jacir, both of whom engage with specific traumatic historical experiences of emigration and exile, but revisit these experiences in slightly more removed roles, complicating their engagement with these particular histories and thus also our viewing positions as their distant audiences, wit(h)nesses of their purposefully disjointed representations of these histories. The modes of presentation they choose likewise complicate our relations to these events, becoming more fragmented and dispersed across a number of different media. Further on in the thesis, I will analyse two examples whose forms apparently could not be further apart. The first of these works will be a durational web-based project by the artist Barbara Campbell linked to a deeply personal trauma and explicitly formulated as a long series of narrative virtual ‘encounters’ with the ‘kind strangers’ who wrote stories for the artist over a period of 1001 nights, and thus sustained both the project and the artist on a complex journey out of the non-space and no-time of such trauma. The other project is an early performance piece by the artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, an apparently far more simple, and certainly far shorter piece in which the artist, a fresh immigrant to the US at the time, gave a set of instructions to his associates according to which he was then entirely wrapped in a cloth and dumped onto the floor of a public elevator and left there for 24 hours at full disposal of his random and unsuspecting audiences, the only invitation for a dialogue consisting of a somewhat warped, personal statement about exile taped onto the elevator wall that went unnoticed by most people. Two artists abandoned to the ‘kindness of strangers’ in what could not have been two further removed experiences yet engaging a similar sense of vulnerability provoked by a tight yet extremely open script that invites full participation of the (at least initially) unknown others.

Perhaps biased by my long experience with live performance, I find the aspects of all these works where they approach performance modes of engagement with their

traumatic subjects most compelling, whether these be performances for a video or a photographic camera, or performances captured by these and other media, and whether such performance aspects involve mainly sound as in the case of Campbell, or mainly visual material, as is the case with the majority of other works. And what 'betrays' them as performances are not simply the aspects of these works that most obviously include or document the artists' bodily presence, it is the aspects in which these works engage with time, with the very different temporalities of their respective subject matters, from a sustained, short but extreme temporality of the interrogation drill undertaken by Fusco and her associate artists, to Campbell's extremely long and complex period of 1001 nights (and days) that marked the series of 1001 performances that constituted her project, and Gómez-Peña's 24 hours of absolute passivity in the face of what could have been, and at times were some extremely dangerous behaviours to which his body was delivered in that extremely small space of the elevator where he 'staged' his performance of exile. Once again, the historical traumas these works engage with reveal themselves in the temporality of these works as events happening in time, yet events that fall out of time into the no-time of structural trauma, so that the strategies of approaching their complex temporality become key in the works' interpretation through the lens of traumatic affectivity.

Eve Dent and Kira O'Reilly, whose work I will analyse in most detail in the final chapter of the thesis, are artists whose practices are focused entirely on the body, without much social or narrative contextualisation, so that in its conclusion this research will return to a certain more familiar, but equally complex territory of live performance, where the nuanced engagement with an understanding of traumatic affectivity is further removed from historical trauma and approaches the complexity of the structural trauma. This is not to suggest some objective increased complexity to these works but to emphasise the strategies and concerns underlying the artistic 'invoking' of the notions of trauma

in performance, where: ‘when [something is] happening in an art context there is a real awareness of what those [notions] are formally rather than when they aren’t separated from the narrative of accident or the wound.’³⁶ In this sense, my closing of the thesis with two artistic practices that, although belonging to artists who work across a number of different media, in the particular pieces I analyse engage above all with live performance, is not meant to suggest that the live is somehow the proper form of engagement with traumatic affectivity. It is simply the form in which this separation of trauma from the narrative of the accident and the wound will hopefully allow me to articulate and observe the nuances of such artistic engagement in clearest terms. But in terms of any promise of a more immediate presence ‘delivered’ by live performance, which I will unpack in much more detail in the next chapter, I prefer to see these works as reminding us that the body is in fact most absent when it is most literally there, just as in another example I will mention in the thesis, in the artist Horst Hoheisel’s negative-form monuments, monuments can be material forms in space and yet their materiality can consist in the placement of a literal absence in space; or just as traumatic time may become a literal absence of time in performance, but this temporal absence is not a staging of silence but perhaps more a staging of oblivion. This complex texture of memory and forgetting and their relation to trauma is something I will analyse in much more detail in Chapter Four of the thesis.

Benjamin’s analyses of the notions of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*³⁷ offer a possible entry point to an understanding of the legacy of trauma and of the psychoanalytic discourse in art and literary theory. Benjamin’s analysis of these two different German words for experience in his essay ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ captures the changes in the understanding of the nature of experience and its relation to consciousness, to memory and recollection

³⁶ Kira O’Reilly in Patrick Duggan, ‘The touch and the cut: an annotated dialogue with Kira O’Reilly’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 2009, vol. 29, no. 3: 307–325 (320).

³⁷ In Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ in Idem, *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), trans. Harry Zohn. London: Fontana/Collins, 1982 (1973), pp. 157–202.

that led to the interest in trauma in the modern era. Benjamin was concerned with a certain devaluation of experience for modern man, a devaluation he describes in another famous essay, 'The Storyteller', as the modern man's inability to exchange his experience with others, tracing its origins to the battlefields of the First World War from which men returned having 'grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience'.³⁸ To challenge this unrelenting silence, Benjamin is concerned with finding new critical and artistic language/s able to address and articulate the drastic change, triggered by modern industrial warfare but exemplified as well by what Benjamin describes as the shock of living in modern cities. Another silence absent from his writing, or rather present only as part of the general critique of the dehumanising effects of the organisation of labour and consumption in capitalism, was the silence of women that was about to burst into that same space of modernism; a silence, however, accompanied by a new and extreme, objectivised visibility of women, which is noted throughout Benjamin's writing.³⁹ Benjamin captured profoundly the modern era's abandonment of any notion of humanism based on a teleological principle of progress that once allowed for the narrative chapters of personal histories to become written into the social fabric. With the rise of industrial capitalism the modern era inaugurated the notion of shock as the experiential norm for both women and men living and working in the rapidly expanding cities, an experience that is immediate and unreflected, overwhelming the senses but making no sense in time, in the extended time of culture, in the shared discourses of experience as it was traditionally understood.

Erlebnis was a virtually non-existent term in German language before it became a popular notion in the nineteenth-century German art history. Its popularity originates with Wilhelm Dilthey, German philosopher of culture and epistemologist who established

³⁸ Idem, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in Ibid., pp. 83–109 (84).

³⁹ Cf. Esther Leslie, 'Ruin and Rubble in the Arcades', in Beatrice Hanssen (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, New York and London: Continuum, 2006, pp. 87–112.

the division between the sphere of *Geisteswissenschaften*, of the human sciences from that of the 'natural sciences' in an effort to find a rational counterpart for the methodologies and paradigms of the natural sciences, which he saw as entirely predicated on the explanations based on the principle of causality, while those of the human sciences should deal with understanding the essentially unpredictable human nature. To do this:

Dilthey makes an important distinction between two German words which can be translated as 'experience'. These are *Erfahrung*, which is the common word meaning "experience", and *Erlebnis*, a coined word from the infinitive *erleben* meaning "to experience". *Erlebnis* was virtually non-existent in German, until Dilthey used it in a special sense. *Erfahrung* is a general term but *Erlebnis* is a special term to connote our inner experiences or our "lived experiences".⁴⁰

Erfahrung connotes experience that comes with reflection, with time; which seemed no longer possible, in the modern cities especially; *Erlebnis* no longer stood for experience understood as an introspective moment, but as momentary, sensual experience. However, whereas for Dilthey's aesthetic theory such 'lived experience' marked the very essence of aesthetics as distinct from scientific reflection, for Benjamin, writing at the start of the twentieth century, *Erlebnis* marked exactly the decline of culture, which is predicated on complex modes of sharing such individual experiences, suddenly silenced by war and the shock of living in modern cities that brought with it what we can now recognise as the self-containment of traumatic memory:

That the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of having been lived in the strict sense [*Erlebnis*]. If it were incorporated directly in the registry of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident for poetic experience [*Erfahrung*]. The question suggests itself how lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience [*einer Erfahrung*] for which the shock experience [*Chockerlebnis*] has become the norm.⁴¹

This citation, presented in Benjamin's essay as part of an analysis of Freud's view of consciousness as having above all a function of protection against stimuli and not of

⁴⁰ Emerita Quito, *The Philosophers of Hermeneutics*, Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1990.

⁴¹ Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 164.

their registration, explicitly links psychoanalysis and Freud's articulation of trauma with aesthetics, it poses the problem of trauma as an aesthetic problem, wondering about the possibility for art to ground itself in a changed notion of experience, a poetic experience which could access the thus 'sterilized' moment of shock, of trauma. The possibility of fixing the immediacy of shock in the registry of conscious memory inaugurates an era of art that struggles to articulate this 'shock experience' and challenge the communicative silence of modernity. With this unprecedented shift in the nature of experience, the arts increasingly withdrew from the narrative in an attempt to find forms that could bear witness to this 'trauma' of modern experience. The artists archived and multiplied, revisited and abandoned, rendered meaning-full and rendered meaning-less and superficial the petrified image of a traumatic encounter, always to find their work as the very tear they were trying to address, as acts of (massive) aggression continued to reaffirm both the necessity and the difficulty of approaching and acting upon trauma.

Benjamin's efforts to theorise this new kind of experience with its profound impact on the languages of the arts has continued to influence theory and today remains significant across a number of disciplines, among contemporary theorists interested in the notion of trauma and working to restore the validity of the idea of 'corporeal memory' and 'sensory memory' as ways of accessing historical experience, particularly historical experience that has been suppressed by dominant discourses, in an effort to promote the work with sensory memory as artistic practice:

Erlebnis comprises the experiential modality *most appropriate* for a world in which the experience of shock has become the norm. It renders possible a more robust and pluridimensional form of experience, one that eschews the privilege of mediated interiority in favor of sensory and corporeal immediacy.⁴²

⁴² Mark Hansen, 'On Some Motifs in Benjamin: (Re)Embodying Technology as *Erlebnis* or the Postlinguistic Afterlife of Mimesis', in Idem, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 237, emphasis in original.

Such linking of the modernist tradition with contemporary understanding of experience shifts significantly if we look at it from the point of view of what the art critic and historian Hal Foster has suggested about trauma as the temporal model that animates the relationship of the contemporary to the historical avant-gardes, as ‘*a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts -- [...] in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition*’.⁴³ It is through the complexity of such a ‘traumatic’ temporal dynamic that the thesis remains in the spaces where the ‘progressive’ promise of the historical avant-gardes underwrites the forms and politics of contemporary art in just such complex relays. The notions of sensory memory and of art not as a reflection but as a certain transmission of experience, are notions and ideas which the thesis will develop in much detail,⁴⁴ but under the more sceptical light offered by Foster’s proposition about the traumatic temporal dynamic that links us to these traditions. The traumatic dynamic of this relation makes such favouring of ‘sensory and corporeal immediacy’ a far more complex endeavour than it may seem, and one where I find live art and performance as particularly ‘well’ placed to engage some of the key problems of bearing (creative) witness to trauma.

I will engage with the works belonging to live art and performance specifically to point to some of the ‘unique capacities’ of this highly hybrid field to tease a radical politics from the very idea of indirectness of reference; I will of course map only a very limited trajectory in the ‘long tradition of engagement with affect and immediate experience’⁴⁵

⁴³ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996, p. 29, emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ I will, however, not offer any comprehensive outline of the history of trauma and art in modernity. The subject has been thoroughly researched, for example, in Visarut Phungsoondara, ‘Representing Trauma: The Image of Atrocity in the Cultural Discourse of European Modernity’, PhD Thesis, School of Arts, Middlesex University, May 2003. Phungsoondara points out a significant critique of Benjamin’s conflation of Freud’s writing on shell shock with the experience of the modern city in Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, London: Verso, 1988, p. 117 (note 81, p. 56 of the thesis).

⁴⁵ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, p. 23.

in live art and performance, following a small number of examples chosen by a certain personal affinity with the works and linked to the specific problematic of art relating (to) violence and trauma. I will engage with these works while remaining fully aware of the slippery nature both of any claim about such ‘unique capacities’, and of the lure of the immediate in performance. In doing this, I will be most consistently guided by the writing of Peggy Phelan, despite and because of the very ubiquitous status of her theorising of the unmarked of performance and the performance of the unmarked, of ‘locating a subject in what cannot be reproduced within the ideology of the visible.’⁴⁶ Whereas Phelan’s theorising of the unmarked is most commonly cited for its insistence on performance as an ontology of presence, it is how Phelan theorises this presence as a ‘suspension between the “real” physical matter of “the performing body” and the psychic experience of what it is to be embodied’⁴⁷ that demarcates far more closely the concerns of this thesis and its tentative search for both theoretical terms and practical engagements that best address this suspension.

Moreover, I have understood Phelan’s challenge to performance studies scholars to engage trauma as a theoretical tool to imply acknowledging the way trauma complicates rather than offers easy solutions for approaching critical writing about performance. If performance, or any work of art, is an ‘event unremembered – yet that cannot be forgotten’;⁴⁸ if, as Phelan writes, performative writing investigates ‘the possibility that something substantial can be made from the outline left after the body has disappeared’;⁴⁹ then the ways we approach this outline in the writing will only ever gain theoretical ground if we

⁴⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴⁸ Bracha Ettinger, ‘Transcryptum: Memory tracing in/for/with the other’, in *Matrixial Borderspace: Essays by Bracha Ettinger*, Brian Massumi (ed.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 162–172 (163).

⁴⁹ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, New York, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 3.

allow it to speak its loss of any stable point of reference. This has been the most challenging task in this thesis, and one I have attempted to address through a sustained theoretical analysis of some of the aesthetic and ethical stakes involved in engaging with trauma in making and theorising art, and performance in particular; and through activating trauma as a complex tool for analysing art. That loss also produces a specific writerly dynamic that interrupts and shifts the analysis, it brings with it a disturbance and perturbation, and complicates the relations between the theoretical voice and the analyses of the specific projects. I have tried to allow for this particular interruptive voice, for a certain perturbation to remain recorded in the form of the thesis; it has also led me to include sections, for the most part as a series of prologues, that allow me to engage with modes of writing that suspend theoretical judgment in order to approach the creative logic of art-making and art-practice.

The performance perspective in engaging with trauma discourses opens some important questions. I must say that my pairing of phenomena of trauma and performance has never been intended as a suggestion that performance is either a traumatic event or a 'right' method of treating trauma, and not only in the light of Bennett's argument against the realist underpinnings of any concept of redemptive art. I have understood the pairing of these phenomena as a paradigmatic placement, in a way that does not suggest that the phenomena are in any way homogenous. In the paradigmatic approach to analysing performance in its relations to history and to trauma, it is in the very gesture of being placed in analysis beside (para) or in the context of performance that trauma exhibits its own knowability. Performance does not engage (with) trauma in order to establish some universal rules for its performative force, or to materially re-present it. Performance as a mode of engagement may instead serve to shift the complex affective workings of trauma from their habitual articulation in narrative and their overwhelming emotional content

into a place where such notions can be observed for what they are in a formal sense, as artistic material. I will address these particular points in detail in Chapter Two of the thesis through an analysis of Agamben's lecture on the paradigm.

Such concerns have allowed me to juxtapose performance and traumatic experience: I start from the proposition that the two experiences share a liminality, but I also establish the 'radical disruption'⁵⁰ that traumatic experience brings onto the scene / stage / site of performance. Indeed, performance, or at least some performance, is already comparable to trauma, 'a witnessing of an event that is constituted by the very fact that it exceeds you [...] Just like trauma [it] persists in recurrence.'⁵¹ The re-enactment / 'actuation'⁵² of a performance score already resonates with the 'reproduction of a unique sequence of acts'⁵³ of a trauma survivor, moving performance away from the proximity of the habitual and towards the exactness of the traumatic. Even the automatism of traumatic enactment seems to have its resonance in performance, in training exercises by which performers may attempt to forego conscious motivation of movement and action in creating scores; also in allowing chance⁵⁴ into the devising process, process of developing dramaturgy of the performance from within the practice rather than from the dramatic text or any other fixed matrices.

The 'surprising literality and non-symbolic nature' of traumatic memory⁵⁵ resonate

⁵⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 4.

⁵¹ Adrian Heathfield 'End Time Now in six parts', *Yishu – Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Winter 2004, vol. 3, no. 4: 37–43 (37).

⁵² Actuation is the preferred term of the performance artist Alastair MacLennan.

⁵³ Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 162.

⁵⁴ Cf. Allan Kaprow, 'Happenings in the New York Scene', *Art News*, May 1961, reprinted in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963, pp. 15–26: 'Chance, then, rather than spontaneity, is a key term, for it implies risk and fear [...] It also better names a method that becomes manifestly unmethodical if one considers the pudding more a proof than the recipe' (p. 19).

⁵⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 5. Caruth in fact speaks of traumatic dreams and flashbacks, and never once uses the word 'memory' in her introduction. On the notion of traumatic memory see Pierre Janet cited in Chapter Four, p. 137.

intriguingly with descriptions of radical practices of performance and live art, with their insistence on the austerity / bareness of the body and the non-representational nature of the performance events. This suggests that in performance something in fact ‘happens’ [‘– What happened? – Happened? – Yes. – I didn’t die.’]⁵⁶ only as much as it resists the ‘nostalgic desire to complete the image rather than be open to rupture’⁵⁷ and perseveres in the precarious s/p^{ace} between the life-affirming impulse where physical / and / vocal action is a leap from the place of trauma, and this different *nostalghía*, that ‘of the worst’ that is our deepest and most private experience of history understood as a ‘rupture on[...] the scene of cognisance or knowing formed as narrative.’⁵⁸

Another possible conflation of performance and traumatic experience happens when we turn our attention to how such intolerable memories and incompatible, impossible histories are inscribed in and dealt with inevitably by our somatic ‘being’, by that ‘psychic dimension of the body, or corporeal dimension of the psyche’,⁵⁹ the in-between zone where the most profound changes occur in the long aftermath of one’s exposure to the sensory and corporeal immediacy of traumatic experience. Thus the traumatic returns our focus with urgency to the body, to a body in performance, a ‘monstrous’ body, a body that ‘shows itself as much as it is being seen by you’ as the performance artist Franko B has written, a body at once observed and in en/action, testing its own boundaries in a gesture of invitation to a shared persistence in the space of an event that is always, as Ettinger would argue after Levinas, an event of the encounter.

⁵⁶ From Edward Lewis Wallant’s novel *The Pawnbroker*, cited in Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, p. 57.

⁵⁷ Michal Kobiałka, from ‘Tadeusz Kantor’s Practice: A Postmodern Notebook’, paper given at Kantor Tomorrow panel at the *Towards Tomorrow?* Conference in Aberystwyth, 9 April 2005.

⁵⁸ Natalia Kariaeva, ‘Public and Private: Challenging Pain’s Triumph in the Poetry of Witness’, paper given at *Poetry and the Public Sphere: The Conference on Contemporary Poetry*, 24–27 April 1997, Rutgers University, New Jersey, no longer available online. Previous HTTP: <<http://english.rutgers.edu/pain.htm>> (accessed in December 2005).

⁵⁹ Jay Prosser, ‘Skin Memories’, in Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Thinking Through the Skin*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 52–68 (65).

The performing body refuses, or defers, the possibility of reconciliation implicit in the act of speech, of testimony; or rather it refuses the all-too-easy removal of testimony, of speech and of the word, from its ‘unlocatable,’ ‘untenable,’ ‘unbearable’ place of survivor.⁶⁰ The danger of this position, for all its poetic force, once again opens the problematic status of any simple investment in the body as a means of ‘delivering’ presence in performance, of a ‘first-person testimony,’ and reminds us of the necessity to remain aware that there is no such thing as ‘really true’ and unmediated work of art, just as there is no such thing as ‘really true,’ authentic testimony,⁶¹ that ‘[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.’⁶²

My research focuses on strategies performance specifically can employ that interfere with the distancing power of the witness position and invite a different, affective politics of wit(h)nessing, in the sense of being-with, by which Ettinger indicates another sense of ethics of what could be described as affective truth, an ethics beyond conscious control, a sharing that happens in the matrixial space, which she describes as a space of severality, a pulsing space of heterogeneity, in-differentiation, and webbing.⁶³ Once again, this is an ethics linked to the matrixial sphere of subjectivity, a living ethics at the porous matrixial borderspaces between what we conceive of as our individual subjectivities. This is not an ethics of relationality,⁶⁴ but a crisis-inducing ethics at the point of impossibility of not

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (eds), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 170.

⁶¹ Cf. Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p. 47.

⁶² Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in Idem, *Illuminations*, pp. 255–266 (257).

⁶³ Bracha Ettinger, ‘The With-In-Visible Screen’ in M. Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art In, Of, and From the Feminine*, exh. cat., Boston: ICA, MIT, and Kanaal Art Foundation, Boston: The MIT Press 1996, pp. 89–113 (106).

⁶⁴ In the sense advocated by Nicolas Bourriaud in his *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Dijon, France: Les presses du réel, 2002 (1998).

sharing, at difficult points of exposure where we learn to acknowledge the inseparability of the other and her trauma from our psychic space while at the same time avoiding a certain pull towards an identificatory relationship, allowing for 'a re-diffusion of traumas that are not absorbed'.⁶⁵ This space of severality is a space of intolerable memories and impossible histories, the debris of relationality. I will address some of the complex strategies in performance of rendering 'present' of trauma, and the ethical, and indeed physical necessity and problematic status of testimony negotiated in performances that engage traumatic experience. The nature of the performance event as a mode of accessing history has changed profoundly through a recognition of the necessity and impossibility of addressing what has been recognised as a paradoxical void of history. The narrative structures and intricate processes of signification have proved unable to carry trauma, in which a sense of time and awareness of space have been shattered and fragmented. The belatedness and gap of the most immediate experience of history in trauma reveals itself not as a void in the sense of history's fatal inaccessibility but as a different organisation of time, which I will engage with in the thesis through concrete analyses of some of the works where such a changed engagement with temporality is most prominent.

In what ways does trauma change the status of witnessing, of both historical and artistic witnessing, of history recognised as a void, as a 'record yet to be made'? How do such acts of witness take place, and how do they *take time* in the aftermaths of violence? Being stripped of their meaning, how are civil spaces, courtrooms, public platforms, lecture halls, theatres, exhibition spaces, even people's homes, re-formed? Being stripped of its meaning in the aftermath of disaster, how is the very notion of truth re-inscribed? Stories re-emerge, at first whispered between those who can trust no one and thus trust all the

⁶⁵ Ettinger, cited in Griselda Pollock, 'Thinking the Feminine Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metramorphosis', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2004, vol. 21, no. 1: 5–65 (13).

more the collective to which they think they *belong*; whispers have a way of multiplying, of increasing the tremor and cacophony of testimony in a social space suffused with fear and silence; but more conveniently, and with time, they will be brought forth into the public space, recorded in documents, on screens, as fact, as fiction.

I had initially set out to conduct this research as an investigation of performance-making that engages historical trauma through complex processes that happen in the dialogue of art with/in society in the aftermath of conflict, but also in more general terms in the aftermath of any major breach of the social ethical contract. For me, an example of such a breach with devastating consequences has been the situation in Serbia since the 1990s wars in the Balkans, which I will come back to in more detail in this chapter. I wished to conduct research into witnessing as an exercise in the recovery of the personal and social narrative through what Michel Foucault, in his 1983 lectures at Berkeley later published under the title *Fearless Speech*,⁶⁶ has theorised through an analysis of the Greek notion of *parrhesia*, of fearless, or free speech, concerned not with the notion of truth as such but with truth-telling as an activity and a practice that is both political and therapeutic, both a discovery of a free voice of the citizen and a dialogue of learning, of writing one's life as a life free from fear. This most significant initial impulse for the process of my research, and the profound and unexpected affective numbing that continually precluded its actualisation have with time shaped the actual practice and form of the writing of this thesis. They have also prompted a more thorough investigation of the issues of the failure of language in the aftermath of disaster and the specific engagement with trauma in my research. Specifically, in terms of how the thesis has been organised, they have led to an investigation of the performative force of violence, of the way violence gags and renders difficult both the

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, Joseph Pearson (ed.). New York: *Semiotext(e)* / Foreign Agents, 2001. Lectures also available online, HTTP access <<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/foucault/parrhesia.html>>.

political and personal aspects of such truth-telling processes; this segment of the research forms Chapter Two of this thesis.

A further layer of investigation has concerned the problematic space of exile, the precarious zone of non- or semi-citizenship where the question of address of any such truth-telling voice becomes highly problematic, and this aspect of the research forms Chapter Three of the thesis. Most importantly, what was initially conceived as an investigation into the notion of witnessing as an exercise in the recovery of the personal and social narrative, and the ability, or inability, of art to give testimony to history, the need and the failure of art and language to bear witness, has led me to research the links between memory and narrative, and the notion of traumatic memory, the break-down of narrative in the aftermath of trauma. It is in this context that Ettinger's notion of wit(h)nessing became a key notion that allowed me to theorise the presence of 'the unspoken, unspeakable, the fragmentary, the inarticulate, the incoherent and the non-verbal'⁶⁷ in testimony, as well as the creative, specifically performative, expressions of this position of witness / bearer of truth, no longer a solitary, self-sufficient, defined and definite figure of the ideal (male) citizen articulating universal truths but of the space of wit(h)ness as an affected and affective body-space of severality, of heterogeneity, in-differentiation, webbing. This aspect of the research has been developed throughout the thesis, but most explicitly in the Fourth and Fifth Chapters, where I investigate the questions of memory and forgetting, and of testimony and wit(h)nessing in the feminine, and engage examples of performance that activate these issues.

The notion of wit(h)nessing also emphasises the intriguing fact that the act of witness, even in language, brings forth the moment of birth, of bearing (witness, a child), of the delivery (of the child, of truth), in what Hélène Cixous has termed the 'cruel

⁶⁷ An anonymous internet comment on the Theatre of the Absurd.

obstetrics' of the continuation of life in the face of, and even in harmony with, its negation and destruction. This aspect of the research has been investigated through Brennan's proposition about the transmission of affect, and through the notion of the matrixial sphere of subjectivity. In terms of research into trauma, this is where the thesis most closely approaches the question of structural trauma and it will be the basis for Chapter Five, a detailed investigation of the ethics of relating in the feminine, as well as an in-depth analysis of two artistic practices that engage the force of structural trauma in performance.

In the context of performance studies, the problem of testimony and the centrality of the witness position in an ethically responsible engagement with history, and with contemporary cultures and their 'extremely complex mechanisms through which knowledge about the suffering of others is mediated and confirmed through procedures of testimony about such events',⁶⁸ as argued most consistently by the Israeli theatre and performance scholar Freddie Rokem, revolves around a key question put forth by many, for example by the Australian scholar Edward Sheer, of 'whether it is still possible to maintain an ethics of spectatorship?'⁶⁹

This crisis of spectatorship, regardless of its topicality, voices a more general and long-standing concern with the status of spectatorship as such, what the philosopher Jacques Rancière has called 'the paradox of the spectator'.⁷⁰ According to Rancière, this paradox in simple terms rests in the fact that there can be no theatre without spectatorship but that spectatorship is a bad thing. The dismissal of spectating is based on a perceived opposition between looking and knowing, and between looking and acting; both imply a passivity of the spectatorial position, its incurable separation both from knowledge and

⁶⁸ Freddie Rokem, 'Witnessing Woyzeck: Theatricality and the Empowerment of the Spectator', in *SubStance*, 2002, vol. 31, no. 2&3: 167–183 (183).

⁶⁹ Edward Sheer, 'The End of Ethics?', *Performance Paradigm*, May 2007, vol. 3: 3–7 (4).

⁷⁰ Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', originally presented at the opening of the Fifth International Summer Academy of Arts, Frankfurt, 20 August 2004, published in *Artforum*, March 2007, pp. 271–280 (271).

from action, taken in this binary as the positive notions and apparently unattainable by the look.

Rancière sees this paradox as resting on a set of certain propositions, of equivalences and oppositions such as:

equivalence of theatre and community, of seeing and passivity, of externality and separation, mediation and simulacrum; oppositions between collective and individual, image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-possession and alienation.⁷¹

Rancière also sees these sets of binaries as more than just logical oppositions. They bring about what he calls ‘a partition of the sensible, a distribution of places and of the capacities and incapacities attached to those places’,⁷² whereby it is possible to exchange the positive and negative values of the individual terms of this distribution but not their partitioning effect as such. These effects rest on a similar kind of presupposition as what he terms the discourse of ‘the stultifying master’: the presupposition of an equal, undistorted transmission, a *stultifying*⁷³ practice of knowledge acquisition in which knowledge / community / living reality / activity / self-possession are established through a direct transmission, a homogenous exchange without a (traumatic) reminder.

In the discourse of the witness, of the analyses of the sites of performance, the in-between times and places performance creates for ‘witnessing the witness’,⁷⁴ should Rokem’s invitation to consciously take on the role of witnesses ‘in the labour we do as spectators and researchers of theatre and performance, as well as in our capacities as artists’⁷⁵ be understood as another attempt to resolve the paradox of the spectator, of the

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 274.

⁷² Ibid., p. 277.

⁷³ ‘The endless verification of inequality is what Jacotot calls the process of stultification.’ Ibid., p. 275.

⁷⁴ Cf. Freddie Rokem, ‘Witnessing the Witness’, in Christie, Judie, Richard Gough, and Daniel Watt (eds), *A Performance Cosmology: Testimony from the Future, Evidence of the Past*. London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 168–172.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 168.

distance involved in looking, albeit via an ethical stance? Rokem's appeal to the witness as both someone 'supposedly giving testimony in a court of justice'⁷⁶ and someone who must at the same time be regarded 'in a trans-historical, even metaphysically determined context',⁷⁷ as Benjamin's angel of history, may suggest a certain knowingness that would be foreign to spectating. And yet, Rancière's paradigm of the 'emancipated spectator' offers another way of understanding Rokem's notion of witnessing the witness in performance. For the emancipated spectator, there is no identity of the cause and the effect, s/he does not learn the artist's 'knowledge'; her or his 'witnessing [of] the witness' does not rely on any transmission of a given truth; in fact, Rancière sees this dissociation of cause and effect as the very principle of emancipation,⁷⁸ or of the nature of the relationship between makers and spectators of performances, a relationship that does not seek to abolish distance but recognises the necessity of the 'spectacle' as the third mediating term, 'the in-between thing', the always-changing idiom of this affective exchange that both links and separates the two sides engaged in it. If we are to be witnesses in this process, the truth of the event we are witnessing will always necessarily be formed in the very creation of this idiom, in that in-between time and place, between the ignorant master / performer and the emancipated student / spectator, where '[t]he effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated'.⁷⁹

And the same, I would argue, is the case for any testimony. The promise of the reconciliatory effect of testimony is not a given, and neither is the promise of its truth, or of its liberating effect on the survivor. There is a *crisis of truth* at work in testimony that marks the greatest challenge, but also the greatest strength of speaking out of the crisis of one's own survival. The listening to which trauma challenges us is the listening of this crisis, and it is indicative that Caruth in her writing pairs witnessing with impossibility in

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', p. 277.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 280.

the notion of ‘the witnessing [...] of impossibility’.⁸⁰ She emphasises that all speaking and listening ‘*from the site of trauma*’ relies paradoxically on what we do not yet know of our traumatic pasts,⁸¹ so that in the performance situation as well, we may be said to gather to share this impossibility, to speak and listen to what we cannot know of the history that has marked us.

There is an interesting aspect of traumatic automatism that likewise blurs any clear divisions between what we consider performative and thus more ‘truthful’ to an originary event, and the idea of the theatrical as signalling pretence. It is linked to the work of Pierre Janet, a pioneering French psychiatrist whose work has been revived in contemporary trauma theory by Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart.⁸² Janet’s use of the notion of *restitutio ad integrum* defines a mechanism by which when one element of a traumatic experience is evoked, all other elements follow automatically;⁸³ it is a strange, involuntary re-enactment by traumatised patients of what Janet at first considered to be an exact repetition of the very specific scene that he defined as the traumatic event. However, he later recognised that there was something ‘theatrical’ about traumatic memory, in the manner it proved vulnerable to post-event modifications. Reconsidering his famous case of posttraumatic grief – a young woman named Irène whose denial about her mother’s death in her care after a prolonged and highly strenuous period of nursing was treated as a case of traumatic memory – Janet notes: ‘I am now obliged to return to this point and to conclude that in the reproduction there is a certain organization in relation to the character and feelings of the patient, that this organization partially transforms the

⁸⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 10.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸² Cf. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, ‘The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma’, in: Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 158–182.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

reproduction of the conduct by giving her something theatrical.’⁸⁴

This ambiguous point of veracity versus theatricality of memory introduces one aspect of my research that has been particularly difficult to integrate in the writing. I grew up in former Yugoslavia, a country that underwent (another) extreme rupture in its history in the 1990s, and I have been part of the many waves of emigration from the country in the course of that decade. While acknowledging the deeply problematic and still crucial role of politics in validating, if not in instigating the processes of retribution and reconciliation⁸⁵ that have since been going on in the region, I have been interested in how artists have grappled with the uncomfortable task of weaving the traumatic real into the fabric of the ‘new’ public imaginaries, along with the forensic expert, the police, the judiciaries, and employing their own techniques of forensics and re-enactment. This history is still both too painfully close and difficult to approach on many levels, not least of all because I no longer live in the region, although I was the only member of my nuclear family to have left the country. The thesis is not in any way an articulate analysis of art that deals with these particular events. It has instead become the way to speak that inarticulate space by tracing its volatile borders, in the ‘borrowed clothes’ of other articulations that have given some shape to this primary and still too forceful subject. However, from its earliest stages this work has been driven by my experience of having witnessed, to a very limited degree and already at a great temporal remove, the breakdown of that country as a student in the capital’s only State Academy for Theatre plagued by a tacit compliance to

⁸⁴ Pierre Janet, ‘Les croyances et les hallucinations’, *Revue Philosophique*, 1932, vol. 113, no. 1: 278–331. (Also in *Bulletin de Psychologie*, 1993, vol. 47: 93–118 (97), as translated by van der Hart in ‘Memories of Sexual Abuse, Janet’s Critique of Freud, a Balanced Approach’, an article co-written with Paul Brown, *Psychological Reports*, 1998, vol. 82, no. 2–1, pp. 1027–1043.

⁸⁵ While independent civil initiatives, human-rights groups and courageous individuals have been and will always be the real force behind instigating these processes, perhaps Serbia is a good example of how little this enormous and incessant individual effort that has not stopped since the beginning of the 1990s amounts to in a public space systematically and continually undermined by the succession of highly aggressive and corrupt political structures.

Milošević's politics, and someone born in a mixed Serbian and Muslim community on the very borders of the war zone. Having experienced the profound difficulty of either agreeing to or breaking away from the social and academic contracts in these situations of extreme crises, I have remained compelled to analyse and come to terms with the nature of the highly particular affects of fear and terror that become the main organising principle in controlling civil populations in situations of war. This proliferation of fear and terror has the power to objectify vast populations: 'The universal "we," that empty expression of unity, inhabits the in-between of the gunman, his victim, and the policeman. [...] "We" extraordinary ordinary people are men or women without qualities, joined in fear,' as Massumi writes.⁸⁶ We lose our specificity in the 'landscape of fear'⁸⁷ that erases the majority of social and human links that make both individual and substantial social dissent possible in these situations. The working of fear brings about such profound breakdown of the social contract that any simple exercise of trust as a counter and challenge to the arbitrariness it brings about easily becomes an erasure, a denial, and in itself also a traumatic occurrence. I thus introduce the notion of anxiety in the thesis as the bitter pill of recovery from such fear-induced behaviours and propose, after Jacques Lacan, that unlike fear and pity, which are the emotions that relate us to that which is other to us, anxiety is the key affect of our intimacies, an affect pointing most forcefully to the inaccessible zone of trauma, but also of *jouissance*, *jouissance* as suffering beyond the pleasure principle, but also as the ineffable, feminine *jouissance* of our most intimate Other.

It is in these more inarticulate contexts that my thesis has been an investigation into the personal and public aspects of survivor experience, experience of those affected and afflicted by traumatic occurrences, by catastrophic events. The difficulty of such

⁸⁶ Brian Massumi, 'Everywhere You Want to Be: Introduction to Fear', in Brian Massumi (ed.), *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 3–38 (23–24).

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

investigation in the light of trauma research rests with the breakdown of the convention of the reversibility of time, of the backwards-and-forwards movement in time that is the necessary condition for a historical consciousness but becomes especially problematic in the light of trauma. Any investigation that would approach these experiences cannot but function as what the Greek-American anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis terms *poesis*, ‘the making of something out of that which was previously experientially and culturally unmarked or even null and void.’⁸⁸ This *poesis* strongly implicates the senses in the production of truth. It establishes ‘sensory meaning as truth,’ when ‘gestures and / or a surround of artifacts are mobilized to bear or deny witness to language’ and where truth is ‘extra-linguistic’ and revealed through ‘expression, performance, material culture and conditions of embodiment.’⁸⁹ This truth is a transformation, a ‘natal event,’⁹⁰ it dismisses the possibility of *translating* the ‘language of terror’;⁹¹ it exposes the anaesthetic effect of all effort at ‘convert[ing] local dread into mobile cultural form,’⁹² critiqued and analysed by Allen Feldman in his thesis on cultural anaesthesia.

Feldman’s account of the involuntary performance of ‘sensory alterity’ of a deeply disturbed Croatian woman folklorist delivering a paper at a conference in Sweden at the very outset of the wars in former Yugoslavia,⁹³ an alterity that was immediately denied and warped into a discourse on violence has led me to contemplate the question of involuntary and unwanted affect and to analyse the silences that ward off the sensory encompassment of violence from public context and public space and what strategies art and performance

⁸⁸ C Nadia Seremetakis (ed.), *The Senses Still: Memory and Perception as Material Culture in Modernity*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996 (Boulder, Westview Press, 1994), p. 7.

⁸⁹ All citations: *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹¹ Allen Feldman, ‘On Cultural Anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King’ in C Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still*, pp. 87–107 (88).

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–90.

specifically allow for that can help some of this affect to 'seep through' into these contexts and these spaces. Feldman has thus inspired me to think further about the place/s of art in working with / through affect, partaking in a certain language of memory of the senses, a notion that Feldman borrows from Seremetakis and that '[i]n this atomized context becomes a vital repository of historical consciousness, and once shared and exchanged, the basis for illicit cultural identities'.⁹⁴

The possibility of challenging what Feldman terms 'cultural anaesthesia' has interested me particularly in the context of one of the less visible aspects of the wars that accompanied the breakdown of former Yugoslavia – a situation especially characteristic of Serbia, with its insistence throughout that time of officially not being at war: an amputation, a certain narrative removal of the extreme violence of war operations from the everyday life, and from art.⁹⁵ This removal was inextricable from a simultaneous and ongoing infiltration of both the everyday life and of art with increasing degrees of violence and volatility that as I am completing this thesis more than a decade later has not in any way been resolved, at least not in the Serbian society.

This doubling of amputation with infiltration operated both in spatial terms – in all and any remaining pockets of 'normality'⁹⁶ where forms of civil and civic⁹⁷ life still

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 103. I will analyse the notion of the memory of the senses in detail in Chapter Four.

⁹⁵ Although this removal was by no means total; it was often followed by a changed tactics of gruesome graphic imagery of war, always insisting that the victims belonged to the particular nation that was displaying them in such a way in an act of false, perverted compassion.

⁹⁶ 'Normality' has remained a key term in recent prominent theorising of the art of the 1990s in Serbia/former Yugoslavia. 'On Normality' is the title of one of the major exhibitions on visual arts in Belgrade during the 1990s ('On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989-2001'; held from 11 September - 7 November 2005 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade). Another major essay by the art historian and curator Bojana Pejić, entitled 'Dialectics of Normality' is the key text accompanying the exhibition she co-curated, entitled *After the Wall*. This points to a certain symptomatic doubling of the critique of normality and its mark on the language with which this critique is still being undertaken. Bojana Pejić, 'Dialectics of Normality', in Bojana Pejić and David Elliot (eds), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, exh. cat., Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999, pp. 16–28.

⁹⁷ The reference to the civic is in some way ironical and misleading, as it was the villages and small towns that suffered the most extreme forms of cruelty and violence in these wars, although much

continued to exist; and in temporal terms – first in the way these pockets of normality were turned into or dropped as zones of war, almost on a whim, through the workings of clandestine and obscure military tactics; and then through the post-war political consensuses by which the new-old political elites there have since been consciously reinstating and re-creating a normality, defined crucially as a legal category, as a reinstating of norms in the aftermath of these conflicts.

Another phenomenon that became increasingly visible and remained puzzling as the violence unfolded was the seeming ease with which ‘normality’ of cultural production continued in the face of atrocity. Without discrediting the vastly different experiences of those under direct threat to their and their loved ones’ lives, and those further removed from the epicentres of war operations at any particular time in the long period of the violent dissolution of the country, this other ‘normality’ of art and culture was on the one hand no doubt a life-saving device both for people working in the cultural sphere, and for the public turning to culture as a means of escape from either a direct or potential (real or media-induced) threat to life; and at least a certain corrective to the aggressive warmongering of the media. On the other hand, it is also this ‘normality’ that seems the most difficult to overcome in any attempt to unlock the democratic potential and put sufficient pressure on the people in power who are responsible for disclosing the ‘political truth’ of the 1990s wars⁹⁸ without which these societies stand no chance of moving on or even identifying the continuing lethal web of myth-making that covers vast networks of willing or unwilling accomplices in crime there.

more is known about what happened in the major cities.

⁹⁸ The urgency of disclosing the political truth of the war in former Yugoslavia rather than ‘the factual record of the crime and its moral and psychological consequences’ is argued extensively in Boris Buden’s ‘Truth and Reconciliation Are Not What We Really Need’ essay first published in Okwui Enwezor, Alfredo Jaar (eds), *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation*, Documenta 11 – Platform 2, Ostfildern, Germany Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2003, pp. 65–78 (this citation p. 68).

Although I understand my research into working with traumatic affectivity in performance as part of conceiving of how art can continue to problematise that normality, I will not be attempting to establish a speaking / writing position for myself here as a 'trustworthy' or a 'valid' witness to these events, and I will refer only tangentially to the complex historical, political or legal facts of these wars, all of which have been extensively analysed and researched across their respective fields. What I have wished to pursue instead, even if only at a removal, is a certain incongruity that these events made uncomfortably obvious about art in particular, both as a creative and a deeply social process. It concerns the difficulty – quite apart from the sheer unwillingness – that the artists were facing in trying to act effectively against the predominant harmful and warmongering social narrative, the relentless lying of the state media machine, the serious physical and psychological harm that befell so many of the bravest, of those who continually voiced their protests. It concerns also a specific incapacity of certain operations of the visual, and especially of the theatrical form to escape its fascination of the 'as if', and open the space of imagination to reality in a country where an increasingly powerful parallel structure of clandestine power was already being planned and established, sealed together by joint acts of crime and murder and slowly overtaking not only all of the country's seats of power, but almost as importantly, taking over the country's most valuable and valued symbolic structures. That was and remains an unwanted and disturbing insight, especially as all state institutions (and a vast majority of art and educational institutions were state-run at the time) became inevitably and increasingly caught up in the realities of war; but it is not an insight that seeks to allocate blame. The abandonment of peace and the abandonment of civil law as the common ground for a civil/ian ethics that comes with it⁹⁹ had clear implications for

⁹⁹ I will analyse this in the thesis through Giorgio Agamben's theorising of bare life and of the state of exception, what he describes as 'a threshold where fact and law seem to become undecidable', in Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 29.

art making but – rather paradoxically and despite a growing number of works that since have and will continue to address and engage with these events – these implications may be traced as an intricate web of absences rather than any easily identifiable presence. My entire thesis is in a certain sense an attempt to approach these absences and analyse and theorise them at a level at which they can be shared across the apparent divide of a missing ‘common ground’, nonexistent shared ‘local dread’ and shared local culture that have both enabled this research to take place and mark its inevitable lack of ‘placedness’.

This research was initially envisioned as an opportunity to return to Serbia and work in the communities in the areas surrounding the town where I was born and where I lived until the age of sixteen, a mixed Serbian and Muslim town very close to the border with some of the towns in Eastern Bosnia worst affected by the wars, with many people in the town being personally affected to various degrees by these wars. As this research progressed, it instead became both a joyous meeting after more than a decade with some of my closest friends, now scattered all over the world, and a far more tentative journey into the nature of these urges to return, a growing awareness of the complexity of any such intervention and the profound difference between this new growing mobile global ‘community’ and the local populations whose travel is severely restricted and whose sense of identity is now more rigid than ever as the result of these wars. The act of departure, no matter what situation may have provoked it, is always final. We forget how grave the punishment of exile once was in what were still predominantly sedate communities, and although it seems like our present mobility means that this could not possibly still be the case, the finality of the act of departure consists not so much in the inability of actual returns (although these can also be very real), but in an utter inability to move along some imaginary historiographic line back into that social space and create a context that would enable one today to enter the dialogue with the local people in any other way but as

someone neither known nor foreign, someone placed outside both these stable experiences and ways of life and of sharing.

What I have been forced to face instead are the reverberations of my own, however limited exposure to these profoundly disturbing times. This realisation, together with an acceptance of the continuing echoes of trauma that this research has brought to the fore, has framed the limits of this thesis as the furthestmost possible points where I was able to articulate these concerns without entirely foreclosing their affectivity. The thesis is thus being written with an awareness and a curiosity about the profound implications of language in foreclosing affectivity, as indicated by Brennan when she defines feelings in her *Transmission of Affect* as ‘sensations that have found the right match in words’¹⁰⁰ but insists that affects are distinct from feelings, that they are what comes without and is not yet interpreted, ‘matched’ to language. In its final consequence, the symbolic nature of language will inevitably repress affect. What this means in the context of any academic research is that we must paradoxically search inside language for openings for that affectivity, and a different notion of writing that brings to mind Julia Kristeva’s theorising of the semiotic as ‘sensory language [that] is not a language of signs; it is a “language”, in quotation marks, a chaos and order of pulsations, impressions, sorrows, and ecstasies at the borders of unformulatable biology.’¹⁰¹ A language of a life as *zoē*.

In attempting to create possibilities for such a disturbance of language to leave its mark in this writing, I have been guided by a set of intuitions about the urges and dangers involved in ‘verbalising’, in putting into work and into (far too many) words something that is still in an important manner an act of auto-bio-graphy, ‘at once a discovery, a creation and an imitation of the self,’¹⁰² of a self, with-in and with-out an act of writing.

¹⁰⁰ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ Julia Kristeva in Idem and Kelly Oliver (ed), *The Portable Kristeva*, 2nd Ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 249.

¹⁰² James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 283.

This has not led me to assume that the framework of language would provide some form of reconciliation with these experiences; neither have I made any conscious attempt to bracket off the incongruities and interruption that this experience has left on the processes of writing and conceiving this thesis.

I was in danger of / verbalizing my moral / impulses out of existence

Daniel Berrigan, on trial in Baltimore - epigraph to Adrienne

Rich's 'The Burning of Paper instead of Children'

But a writer is born and bred on horror.

—To live? It is on the other side of having being touched fatally. The nostalgia of the worst, that's what makes you write. Uninterrupted solitude dictates the one to one dialogue. The only fear of those formerly mad or ex-prisoners or deportees or the humiliated is that Time will tarnish the glow of the embers and heal the wound. The pain is not in the torture, it is in the losing of its dreadful riches.

Hélène Cixous, 'Cruel Obstetrics'

Testimony, like pain, in fact, being an expression of pain in language, emerges as a linguistic impossibility and silence.

Kariaeva, N., on Felman, S.

These three quotations marked the beginning of this writing and have remained resonant throughout the processes of working on this thesis. I do not wish to suggest that the research has since resolved any of the paradoxes voiced in them. Instead they remain pointers on a difficult journey away from any attempt at resolution, or rather towards an awareness that resolution involves a loosening and not a tightening of discourse, as suggested by its Latin root, *resolvere*, which translates as to loosen, undo, settle. What the research allows me to do is identify and explore in some detail certain key themes implied

in or openly addressed through these paradoxes: most obviously the question of writing, of language in its uncomfortable links to and betrayals of an ethics, and its place in the 'dictate' of horror that 'makes' one write. Another difficult question is the notion of the fatal in relation to trauma, and the nature of a terrifying and excessive nostalgia of the 'dreadful riches' of 'being touched fatally'. I have since learned that this is nonetheless a touch that *moves* one; it moves one on. This movement is perhaps similar to what, according to Seremetakis, is implicated in the etymology of the Greek word *nostalghía*. In Greek, *nostalghía* does not foreclose the past in the way that nostalgia is commonly understood among the English-speakers; neither is it too obviously linked to the medicalisation of the term.¹⁰³ *Nostalghía* 'evokes the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience. [...] [It] speaks to the sensory reception of history.'¹⁰⁴ *Nostalghía* is 'the desire or longing with burning pain to journey. It also evokes the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement; it mixes bodily and emotional pain and ties painful experience of spiritual and somatic exile to the notion of maturation and ripening.'¹⁰⁵ The Greek words for senses, for emotion-feeling and for aesthetics all derive, according to Seremetakis, from a single verb, *aesthánome* or *aesthísome*, so that 'in these semantic currents we find no clear cut boundaries between the senses and emotions, the mind and the body, pleasure and pain, the voluntary and involuntary, and affective and aesthetic experience'.¹⁰⁶ A journey through just such semantic currents, this writing and this research is an act of *nostalghía*, a migrant, blurred enterprise, a stubborn refusal to form clear-and-cut boundaries, and a

¹⁰³ The term is considered to have been first coined in 1688 by a 19-year old Swiss student in his medical dissertation as a way to talk about a lethal kind of severe homesickness of Swiss mercenaries, see: Johannes Hofer, *Dissertatio medica de nostalgia, oder Heimwehe* (Basel, 1688), translated in *The Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 7 (1934), pp. 379–91.

¹⁰⁴ Nadia Seremetakis, *Senses Still*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

rejoicing in the intuited workings of an aesthetics which, as Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, before becoming the theory of art, was

the problem of *cognitio inferior*, of the nondiscursive, subjective, nonconceptual (nonconceiving and nonconceivable) *cognitio* which, it could be said, Cartesian mathesis produced by expulsion or exclusion. Obscure to itself, ungraspable, feminine or effeminate, always dependent on a *je ne sais quoi* [...].¹⁰⁷

The thesis has been consistently un- and under-written through just such a ‘nonconceiving and nonconceivable’ gesture of inclusion of the feminine in the aesthetic discourse, but also through a growing awareness that the feminine is not produced by an act of ‘expulsion or exclusion’ only; that the feminine is a web of intricate relations that constitute aspects of subjectivity, as I will analyse it in substantial detail throughout this thesis, especially in Chapter Five where I explicitly develop the idea of the ethics in the feminine through Ettinger’s notion of the matrixial and Suely Rolnik’s notion of the resonant body, as well as two examples of art practices that – although the artists would not necessarily agree with my proposition – poignantly shape and develop the complexities of working with the body-as-feminine in performance.

Why does one even begin to work with and compare the extremes of art and life in what will inevitably seem a formal manner? Where is the point of contact between art and trauma if research is not aimed at art therapy? I will not be including in my thesis the various significant methods of work with trauma survivors through art in order to relieve suffering. This research will trace a different history of performance and aims to answer a different challenge. It maintains that art can and must take up the challenge of communicating the force and the ‘affective truth’¹⁰⁸ of the reality of trauma, but argues that this calls for an important theoretical and methodological shift. In challenging the

¹⁰⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘In Statu Nascendi’, in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, pp. 211–233 (213).

¹⁰⁸ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, p. 2.

determinism that drives the question '[w]here to locate violence'¹⁰⁹ and where to locate this 'truth', the thesis works from an understanding that the complex relationship between corporeal, psychic and social life that is unlocatable as an object is vital for engaging with the questions of violence and of truth. It also works from the specifically feminist intervention that sees the acknowledgement of the impossibility of theory to delimit the object as key in attempting to conceive a different methodology that could address 'the failure to locate death as an object, the outrageous oscillation which this failure introduces into causality and the event',¹¹⁰ as Jacqueline Rose writes.

For feminism above all, the insistence of the question of the location of misery and of violence signals another violent location, that of femininity and of sexual difference, so that the question of the language and metaphor of figuration is never divorced from the question of the act of locating violence. It is not a dichotomy but a key dynamic in the relation between the political (feminist) and the representational (feminine). Rose challenges us to ask how we can speak of violence without sending it 'wholesale into the real from which it can only return as an inevitable and hallucinatory event'.¹¹¹ As a possible answer to her challenge, I will be proposing that in the place of that impossible speech, material renegotiations and transformations of social and personal traumatic histories, histories marked by violence, can happen in performances that place themselves in a paradigmatic relation to violence, emphasising a gesture of standing both in-the-place-of and *beside* the subject of violence, and thus exceeding their mimetic relation to violence through a certain act of in/citation. I will elaborate this point throughout Chapter Two.

¹⁰⁹ Jacqueline Rose, 'Where Does the Misery Come From? Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Event', in Idem, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein*. Oxford, Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1993, p. 93. Rose's question paraphrases and changes the parameters of Wilhelm Reich's famous challenge to Freud.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 106.

The alterity of traumatic experience is indeed overwhelming. Taking on such an alterity in a performance event involves multiple possible traps, and a heightened, exceptional responsibility. This is why one should be strongly cautioned against intellectual courtship of these difficult phenomena. All work touching on the traumatic must take into account the point made by Lacan when discussing the Freudian unconscious: 'It is always dangerous to disturb anything in that zone of shades [...] One can never be sure that what one says on this matter will have no harmful effect [...].'¹¹² In the light of his advice, and having witnessed on numerous occasions the reckless attitude and misinformed decision-making with which trauma can be 'stumbled upon' in art, I have chosen a far more tentative path, bearing in mind another of Lacan's points, which I believe to be highly relevant in any pairing of psychoanalysis and artistic practice:

Freud's unconscious is not at all the romantic unconscious of imaginative creation. [...] This locus is no doubt not entirely unrelated to the locus towards which Freud turns his gaze – but the fact that Jung, who provides a link with the terms of the romantic unconscious, should have been repudiated by Freud, is sufficient indication that psycho-analysis is introducing something other.¹¹³

The fact that traumatic phenomena have, nonetheless, been successfully taken on by theoreticians and artists alike proves that among them, as well, something other than 'the romantic unconscious of imaginative creation' has been introduced into the discourse and practice of art, something that takes in consideration the specificity of Freud's concept of the unconscious according to Lacan, namely that it is 'a concept founded on the trail [*trace*] left by that which operates to constitute the subject.'¹¹⁴

Lacan's analysis of Freud's unconscious grounds itself on the challenge to the notion of 'psychological objectivity', an understanding – or rather an error in Lacan's view – that

¹¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Principles of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1998 (1981), p. 23.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹¹⁴ Idem, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink with H  lo  se Fink and Russel Grigg, New York, London: W. W. Norton, 2002, p. 703.

takes consciousness to be a unitary phenomenon. Arising from the philosophical moment of the certainty of knowledge attained by the Cartesian cogito, such a view of consciousness erroneously extends that certainty to all phenomena endowed with consciousness that are part of psychic reality, speaking of the same consciousness ‘in the illuminated area of a sensory field, in the attention that transforms it, in the dialectic of judgment, and in ordinary day-dreaming’.¹¹⁵ However, Lacan argues that:

[e]verything, on the contrary, points to the distribution of consciousness in psychic reality – however the latter’s texture is ordered – that distribution being heterotopic in terms of levels and erratic at each level.

The only homogenous function of consciousness is found in the ego’s imaginary capture by its specular reflection, and in the function of misrecognition that remains tied to it.¹¹⁶

This awareness of a heterotopic, erratic nature of consciousness provides another opening to what Nancy termed the femininity of aesthetic cognition,¹¹⁷ which works across this heterotopic ‘space’ and cannot be aimed towards achieving the certainty of knowledge / truth. The movement and precariousness of that aesthetic cognition may be compared to the following description of the subject’s (impossible) relation to the unconscious:

[T]he presence of the unconscious, being situated in the locus of the Other, can be found in every discourse, in its enunciation.

The very subject of he who would propose to sustain this presence [...] must, according to this hypothesis, in the same movement be given form [informé] and “called into question,” in other words, be put to the test of his own splitting by the signifier.¹¹⁸

This movement is also a movement of creative decision, so that for the artist the process of creating work may appear as an ongoing problem of enunciation/s, whereby the process is given form just as it is called into question, and vice versa, and the map of this movement, the weave of art making / practice, is always the tentative map of just such a locus of the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 705.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ See p. 43 of the thesis.

¹¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 707.

Other and of such an idea of the unconscious. However, at the very locus where Lacan speaks of splitting, of the two movements of the birth of the subject as an effect of language that is also the moment that effects the subject's refusal to realise that 'he is an effect of speech, to realize, in other words, what he is in being but the Other's desire'¹¹⁹ – 'something other' occurs again that disrupts such splitting, another movement of what Ettinger designates as metramorphosis, not a realisation but 'an organisational mode, based on self-mutual-attunings of borderlinks, which creates and forms the matrixial subjectivity',¹²⁰ the movement in/of the feminine, matrixial stratum of subjectivity where pathways that link us with our pleasure and pain, *jouissance* and trauma are never entirely fissured from consciousness but are a web of links across its heterotopic layers.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 709.

¹²⁰ Bracha Ettinger, "Metramorphic Borderlines and Matrixial Borderspace", p. 129.

Chapter Two

Art and Violence

Prologue

Begin by an (un)certain game of repetition:

i am interested in how performance relates to violence

i am interested in how performance responds to violence

i am interested in how performance apes/appropriates/dissolves violence

i am interested in how performance replicates violence

i am interested in how performance reiterates violence

i am interested in how performance avoids violence

i am interested in how performance escapes violence

i am interested in how performance moves from violence

i am interested in how performance moves towards violence

i am interested in how performance regards violence

i am interested in how performance disregards violence

i am interested in how performance reveals violence

i am interested in how performance masks violence

i am interested in how performance is silenced by violence

i am interested in how performance silences violence

i am interested in how performance begins in the face of violence

i am interested in how performance begins to face violence

i am interested in how performance stops in the face of violence

i am interested in how performance stops to face violence
i am interested in how performance continues despite of violence
i am interested in how performance continues because of violence
i am interested in how performance makes violence stop
i am interested in how performance makes violence begin
i am interested in how performance makes violence stop
i am interested in how performance makes violence begin
or does it never do that?
'shattered'¹ by violence
'performing remains';²
repeating the words of others
like/d
found
reverberating.

What does this 'interest' stand for in such a difficult pairing of performance and violence? What is that imaginary place from which a subject can proclaim 'interest' and observe the two terms with any sort of stability? Is such a subject position even possible? This has been my at/tension in this research; I am poised in curiosity as much as in terror at a 'threshold where we are afraid';³ a liminal space uncomfortably shared by the horrors of death and the urgency of life and of imagination. I say poised for the precariousness is

¹ *Shattered Anatomies* is a limited edition box of artifacts, documentation and theory contributed by a number of international performance makers and theorists. Adrian Heathfield, Fiona Templeton and Andrew Quick, *Shattered Anatomies: Traces of the Body in Performance*. Bristol: Arnolfini, 1997.

² *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* is the title of the most recent book by Rebecca Schneider, New York and London: Routledge, 2011.

³ *A Threshold Where We Are Afraid* is the title of the artist's book by Bracha Ettinger including a conversation with Edmond Jabès, published to coincide with the exhibition 'Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Matrix – Borderlines'. *A Threshold Where We are Afraid. With Edmond Jabès*, trans. A. Hamad and S. Lerner, limited edition (250), BLE, MoMA, Oxford, 1993.

chosen as much as it is a given; a seemingly simple exercise of balance sustained over a very long period of time. ‘The world was poised between peace and war.’⁴ And I choose this curiosity, I make a conscious effort to remain with the liminal; I do this while both aware of the founding quality of the liminal for performance studies and because, or despite of, the challenge posed to the field by Jon McKenzie to be suspicious of its ‘liminal norm.’⁵ The questions of this research hover over such a liminal quagmire between a biographical impulse and the creative movement, where imagination is constantly overwhelmed by the biographical, yet art proves able to shift the terms of this subjection by taking the biographical with it and blurring and confusing the lines that separate the two. And yet as violence enters its reckoning, the list at the start of this chapter – which could read like a relatively universal sort of curiosity about performance in which, as it were, one could replace the word ‘violence’ by a number of other words, like ‘representation’ or ‘reality’, or ‘the everyday’ – begins to seem highly inappropriate, for the overwhelming affective pool of violence always threatens to swallow all these other questionings. Even as I shed the (perhaps only seemingly) obsolete issue of proprieties, the difficulty remains, and it is its persistence that I will try to address in this chapter.

Violence in Performative Paradigms

Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.⁶

⁴ Dictionary example for ‘poised’ in Archie Hobson (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Difficult Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁵ Liminal norm is the notion Jon McKenzie proposes in his ‘(The) Butler Did It’, in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (eds), *Ends of Performance*, New York: New York University Press, 1998; and develops in his *Perform or Else: From Discipline and Performance*, New York and London: Routledge, 2001.

⁶ As violence takes many forms and different societies define it in highly disparate ways, this is the working definition of violence as proposed by the World Health Organisation. Cf. <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=7229&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html>.

In the recently published volume *Violence Performed*, in an invitation to performance studies scholars to engage with ‘the performative role of violence in socio-cultural contexts’,⁷ the editors Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon put forward a set of propositions, markers for a topology within which the volume’s authors are brought together to analyse, theorise and suggest forms of engagement with an increasingly ‘spectacular power’ of state-organised and transnational, globalised political violence. The first of these propositions distinguishes between two highly incongruous characteristics of contemporary enactments of violence: their ubiquitous impact on the visual field of an increasingly global ‘mass audience’, and their almost proportional removal and absence from the embodied experience of those of us fortunate enough not to be engulfed by violent events at any particular moment in time.

‘Violence [...] acquires its immense significance in a delicate pivot between the spectacular and the embodied; it is precisely this quality that demands consideration by scholars in performance studies.’⁸ In a theoretical move enabled by performance studies’ expanded field of analysis, this ‘delicate pivot’ between a body and spectacle, so central to the workings of the art of performance making and spectating, is thus shifted from its more familiar context (of live and mediated performance) and placed at the heart of the violent events in the everyday. With what is now already a strong body of theoretical work that has already performed similar discursive gestures,⁹ this first proposition perhaps loses some of its complexity that I would like to re-introduce here, even if just to rehearse my own understanding of the required conceptual leap, the intricate process of analogy by

⁷ Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon (eds), *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 3.

⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹ In works such as Diana Taylor’s *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997. Another approach focuses analyses on the ways violence is staged in contemporary theatrical productions, but engages a similar anthropological interest in addressing violence and our representations of it - cf. John W. Frick (ed.), *Theatre and Violence*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1999.

means of which we proceed to use the paradigms and tools of performance theory to analyse violence.

In his 2002 lecture ‘What is a Paradigm?’ held at the European Graduate School,¹⁰ Agamben describes the paradigm as a concrete, single historical phenomenon which becomes an example, a model defining ‘the intelligibility of the set to which it belongs and at the same time which it constitutes’. This is the second meaning of the notion of the paradigm as famously theorised by the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn, where paradigm is a model, an example that can be repeated and in its repetition serves to define a coherent tradition of investigation that is not necessarily guided by a stable system of rules; its rules may be derived from the paradigms and, moreover, as Agamben reminds us, ‘the paradigms can guide the investigation also in the absence of rules’. It is this question of the rules that marks the most profound shift in modern theorising of paradigmatic thinking. Agamben is critical of Immanuel Kant’s undermining of the merit of examples, which Kant questions exactly because of their inability to reach an ideal understanding of the universality of rules and laws; in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant links exemplary thinking to aesthetic judgment, however, this time insisting that it also refers to a law, albeit one inaccessible to us, ‘a universal rule that we are unable to state’.¹¹ What Agamben suggests is that it is possible to take a step further and dissociate the paradigmatic relationship from any aspiration to the universality of the law. For Agamben, moreover, paradigmatic relationship does not suggest that the singular phenomena it involves belong ‘under the same genus’; it is not by virtue of homogeneity that a singular phenomenon is used as an example for other phenomena but through a certain gesture of placement. What the

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, ‘What is a Paradigm?’, online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html>>. All citations refer to the transcript of Agamben’s talk featured on the European Graduate School website.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1987, p. 237.

paradigm and the phenomenon to which it serves as an example have in common is not any common material element, not a substance but ‘just a relationship, and it is itself a relationship that we have to grasp’.¹²

So if not with the view of establishing universal rules for the performative force of violence, or to materially re-present it, why do we engage the paradigms of art and more importantly of performance to analyse violence? If, as Agamben likewise suggests, such a paradigmatic placement of performance beside (para in Greek) violence works by neutralising opposition, by establishing a field that is ‘tensional and not oppositional’ and more importantly where violence is not presupposed, hypothesised in advance but exhibits its own knowability in the very gesture of being shown beside or in juxtaposition with performance – how does this particular, unruly relationship make violence more intelligible to us?

These may seem highly abstract concerns. I would argue, however, that the impulse in dealing with the issue of violence still generally falls either into working towards establishing rules, definitions of violence that would help us engage with it theoretically, or on the other hand into looking for re-presentational strategies with which to engage the issues practically as artists. While it is difficult to avoid striving to either define or represent, the paradigmatic relationship in fact enables us to disregard both of these modes of thinking and working, so that through the gesture of placement, and not of mirroring, we can exhibit violence in what Agamben terms ‘its own intelligibility or knowability’.

How this could translate in performance terms may be compared to some degree to a series of three projects from 2005–2006 by the interdisciplinary artist and scholar Coco Fusco, in which the artist specifically targeted the appropriation of feminist politics by the

¹² Agamben, op. cit. Agamben here refers to the French historian of classical philosophy Victor Goldschmidt and his interpretation of the paradigm in: Victor Goldschmidt, *Le Paradigme dans la Dialectique platonicienne* (The Paradigm in Plato’s Dialectics), Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947.

Bush era establishment through examining the role of female interrogators in the US-run War on Terror global military campaign. The project, which Fusco herself described as ‘Performing the Institutionalization of “Bare Life”’,¹³ proposed the military prison as the key ‘theatre of operations’ for the twenty-first century US warfare, the only place in the modern day high-tech wars where the American soldiers see their ‘enemy’ face to face. Her title also indicates that she interprets the military prison also as the zone of bare life in Agamben’s terms, a place where prisoners, stripped of their rights, enter a state of exception, marking a total interpenetration of law and violence that leaves no space for politics as an intervention into law, because it is always paradoxically a space demarcated by the law itself to be such as to allow exceptions from established laws to take place, in the US case including extremely controversial interrogation techniques which have since been prohibited. Fusco’s project focused on one aspect of this issue, namely the specific and relatively new strategy of the US military that has consisted in overtaking feminist rhetoric to instrumentalise female sexual violence as an interrogation technique. Fusco sees this particular instrumentalisation of women interrogators as especially perverse since, as Fusco reminds us, military prisons are paradoxically seen as safer and thus more appropriate environments for female military personnel.

Fusco’s project encompassed three works. The first of these was *Bare Life Study #1*, a group street performance in which Fusco ‘choreographed’ a group of some fifty of her drama students wearing detainees’ orange uniforms to clean the streets in front of the US Consulate in São Paulo in Brazil with toothbrushes. The second work in the series was *A Room of One’s Own*, a performance-lecture written by Fusco and in which she played the role of a female graduate military intelligence interrogator. The work was conceived as a

¹³ Coco Fusco, ‘Performing the Institutionalization of “Bare Life”’, online access, available HTTP: <http://hemi.nyu.edu/journal/3.1/eng/artist_presentation/cocofusco/index.html>. Fusco’s project has since also resulted in the book *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, published by the New York based Seven Stories Press in 2008.

form of a military briefing including slides and specially recorded video clips, briefing the audience ‘on the rationales for using sexual innuendo as a tactic for extracting information from Islamic fundamentalists.’¹⁴ The third part of the project, that I will focus on here, in fact preceded the performance-lecture *A Room of One’s Own* but now consists of a 60-minute film under the name *Operation Atropos*,¹⁵ documenting an immersive simulation training, ‘Prisoner of War Interrogation Resistance Program’ that Fusco voluntarily undertook in 2005 in preparation for her performance as the female military intelligence interrogator in *A Room of One’s Own*. Fusco undertook the training together with a group of six women, mainly fellow artists and ex-students who knew her work well, and a further artist friend as a cameraman. The training, involving high-stress simulation of military interrogation techniques, was being offered for a fee to the general public by Team Delta, a privately run company made up of retired United States military intelligence interrogators.¹⁶ The work of Team Delta reflects what Fusco refers to as the growing ‘military entertainment complex’ in the United States, threading a very fine line between a normalisation of the role of the military in the everyday life and of allowing the general public at least some degree of insight into what happens in these normally inaccessible situations. The opportunity to undertake this short training course thus allowed the artists to circumvent somewhat the tight controls and levels of secrecy on which much of the actual power of the military

¹⁴ Coco Fusco, ‘A Room of One’s Own: Women and Power in the New America’, introduction by José Esteban Muñoz, TDR: *The Drama Review*, Spring 2008, vol. 52, no. 1: 136–159.

¹⁵ *Operation Atropos*, single channel video, colour, 2006, thus named by Fusco to simulate metaphoric and mythological titles popular with the army strategists. Atropos (meaning inflexible, inevitable) is the name of one of the three Fates in Greek mythology, who cuts the thread of life and thus ends the life of mortals. I saw the video when it was screened at *Performing Rights*, 12th Performance Studies international Conference, as part of the Manifesto Room, on 17 June 2006. Unless otherwise marked in text, all citations concerning *Operation Atropos* have been transcribed from Coco Fusco’s discussion of the project at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago on 18 November 2006, online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.vimeo.com/3562432>>.

¹⁶ Team Delta continues to offer their training, online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.teamdelta.net/>>.

complex relies, while not in any way resolving the problematic legal and ethical lines that establish when these simulated behaviours actually can and do become torture.¹⁷ Fusco's strategy was not aimed at re-enacting the victims' experience but rather at re-enacting a willingly undertaken series of military interrogation training sessions. The project likewise avoided reiterating the spectacular manner in which various popular media have been giving the impression of debunking the US military's use of torture. Thus the feminist film and media scholar Karen Beckman explicitly questions the apparent similarities between Fusco's *Operation Atropos* with 'Believe Me, It's Torture', journalist Christopher Hitchens's text published in the *Vanity Fair* in August 2008 and consisting of a photo-illustrated account of his personal experience of waterboarding at the hands of US special forces agents trained in the SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) method of military interrogation.¹⁸ Beckman analyses the style of Hitchens's writing that seduces the readers into believing that he is testifying from the place of the victim, while Fusco makes it much harder to usurp this place and instead poses far more politically acute questions, refusing to engage in a simulation of an 'authentic' experience of torture, which would anyway have had little chance of succeeding and, more importantly, which would be exempting her from the workings of the power that is endorsing these methods. Fusco's project takes a different stance, as is clear from the following statement by the artist: 'Too many activists focus their attention exclusively on the victims [...] obfuscating our fundamental bond with the victimizers who are our compatriots and who act in our name.'¹⁹ Wishing to examine this very implication of the 'ordinary' US citizens, including herself and her fellow

¹⁷ Thus, for example, although Team Delta insisted at the time that it worked strictly within the bounds of the Third Geneva Convention, Fusco notes in her talk referenced above that some of the techniques to which they were subjected are in fact considered torture by the Human Rights Agencies.

¹⁸ Karen Beckman, 'Gender, Power, and Pedagogy in Coco Fusco's Bare Life Study #1 (2005), A Room of One's Own (2005), and Operation Atropos (2006)', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 50, nos 1 & 2, Spring and Fall 2009: 125–138 (125–128, 135–136).

¹⁹ Coco Fusco in 'Performing the Institutionalization of "Bare Life".'

artists, in torture perpetrated in their name, Fusco chooses a different strategy to unknot the binary of victim and perpetrator and understand the wider social implications of these operations, very much in accord with the following point argued in *Violence Performed*:

conventional distinctions between ‘victim’ and ‘aggressor’ are often ill-suited to fully explain the effects of violence. [...] Conceiving of violence purely in terms of cause and effect – and organizing against violence around the theme of victimization – dumbs down the intricate problem of violence’s productivity in the contemporary political sphere.²⁰

What Fusco and her group of fellow-artists did was to examine, in a simulated situation – in Fusco’s words not unlike other resilience-based training in sports or indeed in the arts – the manner in which violence begins to exhibit itself as a set of highly controlled and sophisticated modes of performative behaviours and tactics aimed at breaking down the integrity of the targeted victims. Aware that the actual breakdown that happens in situations of torture creates the lacuna that makes it extremely difficult to approach such experience, and thus not claiming to have gained any real understanding of the experience of the victims, Fusco aimed instead ‘to understand the mind of the soldier’.

The ‘Method acting’ approach that Fusco envisioned as her group’s artistic tactic for entering the simulated interrogation process in order to prepare for the subsequent performance was in her words undone even within the framework of the relatively short time in which she and her team were exposed to interrogation. The video footage, originally meant to be used as working material to aid the planned performance rehearsals, registered this unexpectedly intense process, unexpected especially considering that the rules set at the beginning of the training placed clear boundaries and left the artists an opportunity to step out at any point if they felt the training had overstepped their personal and emotional boundaries. The resulting thirty hours of recorded footage were edited and reconceived as a video work, which testified to the levels of intensity and the blurring

²⁰ Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, *Violence Performed*, p. 5.

of performed and actual behaviour that surprised even the artists themselves. *Operation Atropos*, the resulting video piece, has subsequently been shown in the context of major art festivals and other international events.²¹ What Fusco's team of artists learned, although finding much of the experience laughable on the level of verbal and even physical offense, was the effectiveness and sophistication of even such relatively low-intensity (in terms of military training) interrogative performance on the body's obviously highly precisely targeted somatic responses:

Your body reacts to simulation much in the same way as it would to a real situation, that's why their training is effective [and can show] the way that simulation and the imaginary is so important to the exercise of war, to the perception of war, to the understanding of war and to the understanding of violence.

The effectiveness of simulation of the interrogative performance acknowledged in Fusco's remark meant that the highly aggressive 'make believe' of the ex-soldiers' drill could be undone not through its mirroring in resistance but by an altogether other order of simulation, by an in-adequate mimetic relation that put itself in the place of the victim but remained be-side the violence. And to return to my proposition about how performative paradigm can be used to avoid striving to either define or represent violence, Fusco's project may be seen as just such a gesture of placement, and not of mirroring of violence. By placing themselves inside the interrogation structures whose violent tactics they wanted to critique, but even more to understand, Fusco and her fellow artists were able to exhibit violence, as I proposed earlier, in 'its own intelligibility or knowability', without imposing any particular agenda of their own. While suspending judgment and emotion in these situations is no doubt extremely difficult, the team were at least determined to use their performance training to remain aware of what was being done to them in the

²¹ The video was first shown as part of Coco Fusco's solo exhibition at MC Projects, Los Angeles, March 2006, followed by Palais de Tokyo (Paris), PS 122 (New York), The Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto), Performance Studies International 2006 conference (London), Centro Cultural de la Recoleta, (Buenos Aires), Transmediale (Berlin), etc.

course of intensive interrogations without allowing their instructors to overwhelm them, through the combined methods of interrogation and suggestion, into believing that the terrible things they were threatened with could in fact happen to them, or those around them, as that would totally blind their judgment and ability to resist. Indeed, the so called ‘comrade technique’ of threatening a hooded person with the prospect of hurting someone else, while not giving the victim any chance of verifying whether the cries of that other person were real or simulated, combined with an increasing pressure by the interrogators, is known – and proved so in the case of Fusco’s group as well – to be the most effective form of forcing information from those undergoing interrogation. In the situations of actual interrogation, needless to say, terrible things may and indeed will happen in many cases, and Fusco is well aware that her project is vulnerable to attack for refusing to take any clear stance against the interrogation techniques themselves and insisting instead on displaying interrogation as they had undergone it, as a form of immersive performance, but Fusco’s position on this matter is clear:

For many human rights activists who seek to condemn the use of torture by the US military, considering interrogation as a form of performance and as a kind of political theatre might seem like a distraction, or even a perverse avoidance of the “real” issue. I believe this view is shortsighted and logically flawed. Torture is indeed painfully real, but theatre and performance are crucial to making it work [...].²²

This was the performative lesson learned about the theatrical mechanisms and affective power of simulated behaviour, and it is in itself a significant political lesson. Fusco reminds us in her talk that for many of the professional military men (and increasingly also women) even the gravest acts of human rights abuse are still experienced as simulation, as an instrumental and functional performance. This fact points to the profound ambiguity of what seems²³ to be happening in any process of interrogation. It is also an ambiguity

²² Coco Fusco, ‘A Room of One’s Own’, p. 154.

²³ How something *seems* is important in paradigmatic thinking, and Agamben concludes his paper on the paradigm by citing the beginning of Wallace Stevens’ poem *Description Without Place*:

that haunts all performance, and it is where I would like to return to the proposition about the spectacular and the embodied as the key notions for the significance of violence in contemporary society.

In/Citing Violence

What does it mean to use the performative paradigm to unpack the discrepancy between our fascination with the apparent ubiquity of images and narratives of violence and the further displacement of the experience of suffering that these images and narratives in fact capacitate? Surely it is not only to say that the spectacle alienates us from experience, that had we been ‘there’ we would have known? That the embodied would guarantee us some genuine means to a lost authenticity? That seeing or experiencing suffering in flesh would somehow act as ultimate proof and as such enable a genuine act of witnessing? That a tremor of bodies would lead to a social uproar and to ‘a productive transnational discourse’²⁴ and thus somehow do away with violence? It is especially when analysing the dynamic of the embodied and the spectacular via a performative paradigm that such hopes – however well intentioned – become untenable, as does the very notion of any clear opposition between the spectacular and the embodied. At the very heart of the paradigmatic field of tension, Phelan’s notion that ‘performance marks the body itself as loss,’²⁵ and Amelia Jones’ theorising of performance and body art as the most ambiguous and problematic of art forms especially in their relationship to presence, in fact teach us that body / subject is never delivered to the viewer – or to itself – unmediated, that the embodied is always also spectacular, that in Jacques Derrida’s words ‘the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already infiltrated presence, always already inscribed there

‘It is possible that to seem, it is to be. And the sun is something seeming, and it is. The sun is an example. What it seems, it is. And in such seeming all things are.’

²⁴ Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, *Violence Performed*, p. 5.

²⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 152.

the space of repetition and the splitting of the self.²⁶ So rather than delivering us the body (of truth, of the Other, of pain, of in-justice), the performative paradigm works to unbind the oppositional force of violence, the force that lends violence its power over anyone not willing or able to reciprocate it.

If, as with any performative, violence holds the potential both for normative action and for its transgression, then there is no amount of control and preparation that will do away with what McKenzie has termed ‘reversibility of performative force’²⁷ – the fact that the performative force of violence can and will ‘turn on itself’ and generate critique, albeit a critique the effects of which cannot be secured. In view of this fact, perhaps the performative analysis of violence would be better served by an awareness of violence as citation and in-citation, an awareness that the (highly volatile) potentiality for both the undoing and the affliction of violence (w)rests with its citationality and not with any definitive notions of ‘the body’ and ‘the spectacle’ as guarantors of a stable system of rules of discourse.

This argument is of course itself highly citational. It rehearses the dynamic within the performance studies field brought about by the conceptual challenge of the poststructuralist critique to the identity politics and the politics of visibility in performance, the challenge that McKenzie maps in detail in his *Perform or Else: from Discipline to Performance*. McKenzie works through the notion of the paradigm to chart the evolution of the performance studies discipline from its beginnings in theatre and ritual to its more recent focus on theory and performance art, but he does not dismiss either of these positions. Reminding us of Marvin Carlson’s observation concerning the

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, ‘That Dangerous Supplement’, in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 157; cf. Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Winter 1997/1998: 11–18 (14).

²⁷ Jon McKenzie, ‘Abu Ghraib and the Society of the Spectacle of the Scaffold’, in Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, *Violence Performed*, p. 354.

creative tension in performance studies ‘between the desire to provide a grounding for effective political action by affirming a specific identity and subject position, and the desire to undermine the essentialist assumptions of cultural constructions’;²⁸ McKenzie simply argues for an awareness about the difference, the alterity that does exist between these two positions where, with the arrival of the poststructuralist critique what used to be perceived as the political ‘efficacy of embodied transgression has been reworked as the efficacy of discursive resistance, and, in passing, performative presence [has given] way to performative iterability’.²⁹

I have retraced these notions in the specific context of ‘violence performed’ because the poststructuralist critique feels especially pertinent for the in-citational madness of the escalations of violence; I have also interpreted the notion of paradigmatic thinking through Agamben’s lecture to question our need to establish definitive lines of development of the discipline which would render any of its aspects obsolete. It is interesting that Agamben in fact explicitly claims that: ‘[t]he apparent seriousness of metonymical contexts, like the chronological and geographical, have no epistemological basis at all’ and criticises ‘academic disciplines which have no epistemological status, such as those in the humanities’ for their reliance on geography and chronology which are in themselves just another set of ‘conventions for measuring’. So rather than placing performance studies in any chronological or a geographical, or even an interdisciplinary context, I am curious how we can tease back from these contexts the paradigmatic as an unashamedly aesthetic mode of thinking about social and cultural performance. As throughout this thesis, aesthetics is here understood, following Nancy,³⁰ as dealing with aisthesis, with sensible knowledge: ‘That this cognitio can itself never be “known”, that it implies a new, unheard-of “science”

²⁸ Idem, *Perform or Else, from Discipline to Performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 44.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘In Statu Nascendi’.

of “sense” and “sensation” (but without sacrificing anything to romantic ineffability) – here, perhaps, are the biggest stakes. Let us call this “science” aesthetics.³¹ There is no easy way to engage this un-knowing of ‘aesthetic’ knowledge in theoretical writing which, as Yve Lomax would argue, easily slips into writing from a ‘raised platform of a tribunal’,³² with senses held safely at bay, a writing of a judge, or a prophet, and only then perhaps, Lomax will add, also of a poet; but a poet who is also a judge, who is also a prophet, or at least has some dexterity in taking over their elevated points of view. It is particularly hard to find a language for such an aesthetic theorising of violence, where the stakes are very high and, as trauma discourse would argue, the exposure leads to the thrusting of the subject out of the order of speech, so that it is impossible to assert the ‘I’ who would articulate such violent cognition. This is why I will be discussing and analysing the impacts of violence rather than the violence itself; analysing the remainders of the volatility of violence as it is re-marked by trauma; and not so much the spectacular display of the actively violent few; or many, depending on how we construct our (mathematical) sense of disaster/s.

Especially with the expanding interdisciplinary engagement with the performative force of violence,³³ I am interested in the differences that arise when shared analyses from other related disciplines are engaged to create performative interventions into the questions of trauma and violence and grapple with the complexities of how violence functions in the public realm/s. When the focus re-turns to the practice of performance, what I have found far more challenging is renegotiating our often very different views on, as Bennett has put it, how art produces thought (in all respects and thus also in its relation to violence)

³¹ Ibid., pp. 214–215.

³² Yve Lomax, *Sounding the Event: Escapades in dialogue and matters of art, nature and time*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005, p. 53.

³³ Cultural anthropologist Allen Feldman is one of the key scholars from other fields to engage the performative paradigm to theorise the disparities between ideological rationales for violence, and violence as it is performed. Among his many works on the subject, I address the essay ‘On Cultural Anaesthesia’ on pp. 35–36 of Chapter One.

rather than ‘partaking of a body of theory engendered elsewhere’; how this thought is produced will be traceable solely in the materiality of art’s making and processes, what Bennett terms the ‘dynamic operations of art.’³⁴ Instead of any easily articulated referents to violence, the works of many artists remain, paradoxically perhaps, with the apparent impossibility to answer and produce any *real* impact on the forces of violence through art and performance making. However, Bennett also sees a political potential in the way this work insistently remains in proximity of the traumatic, noting that there is ‘an abundance of work that deals with affectively charged space and with an evocation of place in the aftermath of conflict. [...] these works move our conception of trauma beyond the realm of the interior subject into that of inhabited place, rendering it a political phenomenon.’³⁵

One such work that takes place as its key to unlocking traumatic content is the Serbian artist Milica Tomić’s 2009 project, described by the artist as ‘intervention in the public space’ and titled with a citation, a fragment of a poem by Oskar Davičo, a celebrated poet and writer, and an active journalist and political figure in socialist Yugoslavia: *One day, instead of one night, a burst of machine-gun fire will flash, if light cannot come otherwise.*

The work was dedicated by the artist to the members of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative from Belgrade who were arrested on 3rd October 2009 and threatened with international terrorism charges after standing accused of throwing Molotov cocktails at the Embassy of Greece in Belgrade. That mildly violent gesture in the permanently volatile public space of Serbia was at the time claimed by a totally different anarchist group, in solidarity with a Greek anarchist, Todoris Iliopoulos, who had been imprisoned in Greece and in a critical condition after a prolonged hunger strike. The members of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative were held in prison for the maximum possible period of six months before their trial began and then released on the first day of their trial. The act

³⁴ Both citations Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, p. 150.

³⁵ Ibid., p.151.

of their imprisonment was condemned by a large number of public figures as a travesty of justice motivated by a staunch right-wing and nationalist influence in Serbian official politics that marks a painful and unending schism in Serbian political and social life, a continual rhetorical and violent remarking of the past confrontations of the two parallel armies, People's Army on the left, and the Chetnik movement, initially made up from the former members of the Royal Army but in the course of the Second World War moving increasingly to the right of the political spectrum; both of these armies fought in Serbia, very often fighting each other.

Tomić conceived her project as a physical re-marking of locations in Belgrade where significant actions took place during the Second World War of the antifascist, partisan-led People's Liberation Struggle against the fascist troops. The artist walked through each of these spaces dressed simply in black jeans and with a black short winter coat, carrying an AK47 weapon in her hand, explaining her project as a symbolic move from the position of a victim to that of a rebel:

It is an attempt to proceed from the position of a rebel, assuming an active position, without referring to the position of a victim, moving from the position of a victim onto the streets, politically distanced from the politics of terror and antiterror, without resentment, with a machine gun in hand, carrying it simply and necessarily, as if it were a supermarket carrier bag or an umbrella.³⁶

Blond and elfin-like, Tomić indeed seemed to pass unnoticed as she walked the streets of Belgrade carrying a machine gun, in and out of supermarkets and then continuing with a carrier bag with groceries in her other hand. A gesture of defiance in a country where the many positive achievements of the twentieth century progressive left-wing politics have been continually erased over the past twenty years, Tomić describes her strategy as creative geography, a term she borrows from an avant-garde film editing technique invented in the

³⁶ Artist's statement, online access, available HTTP: <<http://milicatomic.wordpress.com/works/one-day-instead-of-one-night-a-burst-of-machine-gun-fire-will-flash-if-light-cannot-come-otherwise/>>.

1920s by the early Russian avant-garde filmmaker Lev Kuleshov, a technique ‘where various locations, places and times all appear to occur in one and the same place over a continuous period of time, referring to these places as “places that remember”’.³⁷ Finally presented as a video action, the work was accompanied with the audio recording of Tomić’s 2003 interviews with a group of former partisan movement fighters, both men and women, who spoke to her about their past, their decisions to join the struggle against fascism during the Second World War, and their views of the role of the antifascist movement today. Tomić clearly took sides in her work with progressive left-wing politics, while acknowledging in the formal structure of her piece, in its video frames, that ‘a new politics is not to be found yet, and that is why [her] character, even though she knows precisely where she is going, still wanders and roams, remaining imprisoned within a framework given long ago’.³⁸ In its poignant remarking on what is at the moment a politically highly contested history in Serbia, Tomić’s work is very much in rapport with Bennett’s proposition about situating trauma outside some supposed interior and instead using art as a unique way to animate the charged space of communal trauma. Inserting her ‘character’ visually in the place of the rebel, openly carrying a machine gun in a public space saturated with violence that is usually hidden, Tomić’s work is both a visual marker of that violence, and an act of shifting the present reality of everyday violence to a time of a past struggle she is re-enacting through her ‘character’, a fictional Milica Tomić framed in a memory of a just struggle of long ago that is not her memory but a collection of biographical accounts of people, some of them close and some unknown to her, and perhaps equally or even more so by her own memory of a time when that history was not so aggressively contested in Serbia.

The work perhaps consciously echoes Francis Alÿs’s 2000 *Re-enactments* video piece, consisting of two apparently identical videos showing the Belgian artist based in

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Mexico City doing exactly the same action of buying a 9-mm Berretta gun, and then proceeding to walk through the streets of that city known for its gun crime, with the gun clearly visible in his hand. In Alÿs's case, the tension soon starts to mount and after twelve minutes (both videos show a timer) Alÿs is arrested and disappears in a police car. Only after reading the catalogue, one realises that one of the videos is showing a re-enactment of the initial actual arrest, which Alÿs recorded on the following day after convincing the police that he was not a dangerous individual, and persuading them to help him re-enact the exact scene for the camera, this time including a fake arrest at the end.

The juxtaposition of the two works is interesting both in their contrasting gender aspects, as a result of which, even though she was in fact carrying a much larger gun, Tomić was able to blend into the everyday, while Alÿs was immediately spotted and arrested, identified as part of the violent crime culture he was echoing in his action. An even more interesting dynamic concerns the different positioning of the two artists inside the respective social spaces in which their interventions took place. Alÿs, a foreigner in Mexico City, was able to fully inhabit the empty signifier of the gun-carrying man simply as a visual marker, presumably without any complex personal history linked to the streets through which he walked in his action. However, Tomić's work is saturated in memory. Instead on a purposefully flat canvas of the contemporary everyday, her work happens in 'places that remember', tracing their highly charged, traumatic creative geography by embodying the history actively suppressed in the current Serbian political climate eager to define the country in national terms. One complex aspect of Serbian reality that the work does not reflect is the reality of the blurring of any clear division of a leftist versus nationalist politics in Serbia. The traumatic point of Serbian politics remains the fact that it is run by the most regressive of both of these political options, by an unchecked and powerful former Communist Party secret service, and by a stubbornly persisting warring

nationalist agenda championed by some of the country's highly prominent intellectuals and public figures. The beauty of his poetry notwithstanding, Davičo himself remains deeply implicated in the dark sides of the socialist era in Serbia, with the levels of his involvement with the State Security and in the workings of our former socialist state unclear, as unclear as the roles of all of us who were once its citizens.

Facing the pitch-black politics of this oxymoronic and catastrophic merger of the two extreme political options, no amount of AK47 weapons will unlock the deeply traumatic erasures of progressive left-wing politics in Serbia. And although Fusco was perhaps working in not so compatible a context, one aspect of her work that can bring interesting, albeit disturbing potential to Tomić's poetic action, is the removal of that 'character', of Tomić's desired positive subjectivity, even if that desire is one renouncing the subject position of a victim for that of a rebel 'with an active stance'.

The necessity not to take sides in these most sensitive issues but to unpack them by inhabiting their very grain is a significant proposition in Fusco's project. However, while Fusco works within the hyper-visible territory of the US war machine, Tomić is in a far more difficult situation, inside a profoundly local history and in a country deeply traumatised by a series of wars in which it officially did not partake, where local variations of mafiosi carrying machine guns have been part of the folklore for two decades already, where political killings from the 1990s have yet to be resolved, and witnesses are subsequently too frightened to talk, and where, moreover, nothing is done to a rehearsable pattern. In the midst of that reality, it is almost too much to ask of any artist to 'inhabit the grain of our current fascist ideological mindset' as José Esteban Muñoz described Fusco's project.³⁹ Tomić has consistently engaged with some of the most difficult and traumatic issues of Serbia's most recent wars and political and social traumas. In the case of these sharp

³⁹ Coco Fusco, 'A Room of One's Own', p. 137.

political divides, it appears that inhabiting any number of positive alternatives, or even caricaturing that fascist ideological mindset cannot easily unlock the buried traumatic affectivity that Tomić is addressing in her work. However, what her strategy does is to bring to the soft light of day (*One day, instead of one night*, as the work's title says) the clandestine workings of the in-citational force of violence in the everyday.

Some Histories Are Better Not Repeated

On another level, the growing scholarly and artistic engagement with violence has been a forced kind of engagement, an engagement itself marked by a kind of violence. It has been forced on artists and scholars by the changing strategies of a politics that thrives on the spectacular power of violence, and forced by them as unsolicited partners in a one-sided sort of dialogue, addressing political and military decision makers who care little for what those opposed to their aims have to say about the obviously highly effective ways in which violent acts are committed upon and relayed to both seemingly impervious and easily agitated populations.

Even the hypothetical idea about any stable community of artists and scholars dedicated to addressing violence in society is constantly eroded by the 'incommensurability of different topographical and cognitive positions, between which the discrepancy cannot be breached'⁴⁰ that challenges any writing in proximity to violence that does not disavow its testimonial, tainted, highly insubstantial voice. Whereas this discrepancy can and should be seen as an invitation to a different kind of dialogue, a dialogue as 'a convention of failures [...] a meeting of the undone, a beautiful catastrophe of misunderstanding',⁴¹

⁴⁰ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*, London and New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992, pp. 207–208; the citation refers to Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*.

⁴¹ Adrian Heathfield, 'Writing of the Event', in Richard Gough, Daniel Watt, Judie Christie (Eds), *A Performance Cosmology: Testimony from the Future, Evidence from the Past*. London: Routledge, 2006, p. 181.

it is important to identify moments that make such a dialogue especially difficult in this volatile terrain.

This is another aspect of the question of addressing the performative force of violence that the text(s) of *Violence Performed* somehow leave out, perhaps as resolved by an earlier generation of scholars,⁴² but I believe such a dialogue would be strengthened by a continuing and explicit critique and understanding of our own speaking and writing positions with regard to violence as artists and scholars in this very field of performance studies, as it is these positions – although themselves not in any way stable – that make us ‘uniquely qualified and ethically obligated’⁴³ to explore both the ‘sitedness’ and performativity of violence.

The difficulty of establishing the ‘we’ in the proposed performance scholars’ gathering on violence performed starts perhaps already in the authors’ opening remark:

In the relatively few years since 11 September 2001 – and beginning precisely with the repetition of images from that day – we have seen an unprecedented increase [...] in the representational prominence of violence both as an awesome spectacle to behold and as a domain of political discourse that dominates contemporary world-making.⁴⁴

While understanding very clearly, however very differently, what such an ‘unprecedented increase’ may involve, the dating for many of ‘us’ coming from former Yugoslavia begins a decade or so earlier; and if we continue re-marking significant rupturing events in a similar fashion the representational prominence of violence and its political

⁴² As the volume includes essays by Freddie Rokem, Jon McKenzie, and the Afterword by Peggy Phelan, this generational division is in fact non-existent in the volume but these particular questions are not analysed, perhaps as they were not felt as key and needing to be so specifically addressed in the contextualising introductory essay. The introduction does, however, explicitly state that ‘[w]e do not enter the conversation about violence lightly; we know that the stakes in doing so are precisely life and death [...]’. It is the need to develop ‘an expanded vocabulary on violence’ that motivates the editors in their ‘urgent summons’ to performance studies scholars, and it is also my motivation here to contribute to this difficult conversation (all citations: Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, *Violence Performed*, p. 7).

⁴³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

exploitation appear to have always been and remain the norm and lose their perceived importance in anchoring our discourse/s on violence. Moreover, in triggering a sense of 'competition' in contextualising discourse they too often preclude dialogue across the vastly different geographies in which our gatherings should ideally take place, and reinscribe a national political positioning even as we attempt to be critical of it. Unless precedence is granted to the events of 11th September 2001 on the account of the unparalleled investment of the US media in the sophistication of the image production of its 'awesome spectacle', it is crucial that we posit our engagement with the spectacular power of violence in other than such locational gestures.⁴⁵ However significant and inevitable the acknowledgement of our own sense/s of belonging may be for the specificity of our discourse, it is also what easily gets us caught up in another and not-so-new spectacle of living off 'a war of [our] own', as Tirdad Zolghadr wittily argues in his 'Poornography':

Ever since the Iliad, the spectacle has been part and parcel of the narratives by which human affliction has been communicated, and the artist has played an honoured role in this regard. [To quote Tom Holert,⁴⁶] the ultimate prize for any ambitious creative worker must be a war of one's own [...].⁴⁷

As a manifestation of the inevitable 'undoing' of art in its relationship to violence, the notion of 'a war of one's own' reminds us of our own entanglement in the workings of the spectacle, calling for a complex and constant renegotiating of our very basic premises as artists and scholars in relating (to) affliction. In a certain sense, it reminds us how easily or even unavoidably the work of artists and scholars likewise partakes in the making of a history of violence, filling the conceptual gap between the shattering of complex webs of connections that violence brings with it and new visual and verbal narrativisations,

⁴⁵ See pp. 43–44 of the thesis for the feminist critique of determinism driving the gestures of locating violence in Jacqueline Rose's 'Where Does the Misery Come From?'

⁴⁶ Tom Holert is an art historian and writer; he currently teaches at the Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna.

⁴⁷ Tirdad Zolghadr, 'Poornography', *frieze*, Jan/Feb 2006, no. 96, online access, available HTTP: <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/them_and_us/>.

however provocative, earnest or therapeutic, which will inevitably function as a scab on the open wound of traumatic affliction.

The challenge, as Della Pollock has written, is instead ‘to grasp [our] own historicity [...] to recognize [our] entailments in structures, codes, and discourses of power, and to explore [our] concrete and often discontinuous relation with embodied (local, family, institutional) histories.’⁴⁸ With the extreme force of violence, however, our relations with embodied histories on which we all profoundly depend may become entirely severed.⁴⁹ Such severing marks the limits of our positioning at any particular moment in time in relation to the delicate pivot of the embodied and the spec(tac)ular, in relation to the ‘painful proximity’ and ‘specular distance’⁵⁰ to violent events. It is a minimal distance where, as Elaine Scarry demonstrates, ‘[t]o have pain is to have certainty; to hear about [or see] pain is to have doubt.’⁵¹ But it is also the limit at which Ettinger places her notion of the matrixial, trans-subjective sphere, where traces of a primordial transgressive psychic field of severality – linked to intrauterine ‘relations-without-relating’ but not limited to them in any sense of linear temporality – remain an affective potentiality that is suppressed because it poses a potential risk of psychotic regression and fragmentation. As with McKenzie’s notion of the reversibility of the performative force of violence, what may be called the performative power of trans-subjective webbing is a potentiality that can also be deeply regenerative, through the workings of what Ettinger terms trans-subjective webs, strings, threads. What is significant in this particular context of how art relates to violence

⁴⁸ Della Pollock, *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, p. 4.

⁴⁹ This is exactly the difficulty faced by the Khmer survivors and masters of traditional Cambodian dance whose relation to their art and their survival Judith Hamera has grappled with in her article on ‘The Answerability of Memory’ that I cite in this Chapter, p. 79, and discuss extensively in Chapter Three.

⁵⁰ Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p. 39.

⁵¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 13.

is that these matrixial threads of potentiality show how through art, as we move from the structure of the symbol, of language; via phantasm and the spec(tac)ular; towards the field of the traumatic, such limits can, and may also become transformative, may become thresholds.

There is, however, no logical shift, no easy transition between these three realms. What this may mean on a very basic level in terms of this argument is that our awareness and focus on the interdependence of violence and the social realm, our ability to unravel the workings of power in the performance of violence in society, does not translate well, or at all, to what violence does as it shatters the very fabric of our personal topographies. Kalí Tal, an important scholar in the field of trauma studies, carefully distinguishes the shattering of personal sets of beliefs, of our personal myths, from the social myths that are undone in the aftermaths of violence.⁵² Practically impossible to disentangle, these two realms are commonly conflated in our ‘inability to recognize the inaccessibility of the survivor’s symbolic universe’⁵³ that becomes the locus of either a metaphorical removal or of a certain over-investment and fascination with the abyss of liminal experience: ‘Caught forever in this liminal state, the survivor comes to *represent* the shattering of our *national* myths, without being able to shatter the reader’s [or viewer’s] individual *personal* myths.’⁵⁴

There is a further aspect to this incommensurability of the experience of survival that has been analysed by the Lebanese poet, essayist and journalist Bilal Khbeiz in his controversially titled ‘Gaza–Beirut–Tel Aviv: In Praise of Selfishness and Opportunism’. Not to be mistaken for an all-too-easy cynical praise of the ugliest behaviours that flourish in war zones, what Khbeiz addresses in his article are far more personal issues of the

⁵² Kalí Tal, ‘There Was No Plot, and I Discovered It By Mistake: Trauma, Community and the Revisionary Process’, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 115–153.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

apparent ‘impurity’ of sorrow, courage and honesty of the survivors as seen by those further removed from sites of violence. However eager the latter may be to support the causes of the afflicted, this perceived ‘impurity’ provokes indignation and a failure to extend one’s sense of empathy to embrace the less pretty sides and affective aspects of survival. This is a significant failure of imagination, and a failure that shows very clearly that what is very much at work in empathy is indeed our imagination, our phantasmic sense of projecting our values onto an imagined scene, our theatre where through fear and pity our emotions shall once again be purified. Instead of fear and pity, the closeness to affliction would inevitably produce anxiety if we were to really affectively engage with it. As the philosopher Sam Gillespie wrote, relating to Lacan’s claim about anxiety being the only affect we can be sure of, while all other affects that form our emotional responses can be deceiving: ‘What we fear or pity is conventionally what is other to us: in contrast, what arouses our anxiety is altogether intimate to us’.⁵⁵

Fear and pity, the ultimate emotions of an Aristotelian aesthetics of theatre, are also the affective source of the schism that produces the wall of silence between ‘us’ and the afflicted populations, many of whom will be grappling to come to terms with some form of traumatic experience. Addressing this schism, Khbeiz compares it explicitly with the manner in which art traditionally relates to its subject:

Art is a forceful interruption of a narrative that both precedes and follows the moment of depiction, and thus it asks us to read the stories of the models at that precise moment. In a similar vein, the visitor inspecting the damage in solidarity with the afflicted, prepared to feel sorrow for them and take a courageous position in supporting them, wishes for the survivors to commence their lives from the precise moment that catastrophe befell them. That sympathizer wants to force the victims into their grief-stricken

⁵⁵ Sam Gillespie, ‘Giving Form to Its Own Existence: Anxiety and the Subject of Truth’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 2006, vol. 2, no. 1–2, ‘The Praxis of Alain Badiou’, pp. 161–185 (180). Gillespie was one of the leading figures in introducing the French philosopher Alain Badiou to the English-speaking world.

roles in order to defend their cause at the moment of its most blunt and cruel manifestation.⁵⁶

Khbeiz's comparison points to a complex aspect of the visual language linked to a projected ethical ideal as both distance and closure, as a conclusion to the work, symptomatic of the striving for an ideal present that similarly arrests identities and fixes narratives into moments that are striking, that fascinate.

In Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, fascination forms a necessary aspect of any art work and is linked to the concept of the gaze, to *object a*: 'A left-over of the activity of the scopic drive in the Real, *object a* is cleft from the subject as well as from the Other, and it has no direct representation by image. In the field of vision, such a split *object a* is the gaze.'⁵⁷ Another term linked to the gaze is fascinum, 'the evil eye [...] which has the effect of arresting movement and, literally, of killing life.'⁵⁸ The implications of Lacan's theorising of the fascinum remind us that the ethical call to address and analyse violence and affliction does not automatically, or even easily place us outside such spec(tac)ular narratives. It is indeed the paradoxical ease with which the spectacular apes and overtakes artistic strategies for dealing with violence that is at stake here.

Artists have always been called upon to consider, represent, either glorify or vilify violence through a visual and narrative reminder of the violent event. What has changed in this uncanny mutual dependence of art and war, as Boris Groys has argued in his 'Art at War',⁵⁹ is that our contemporary warrior has taken the means of artistic representation in his / her own hands, relaying acts of war and terror into the public domain via the mass media so that there seems no place left for the artist in this production and redistribution of

⁵⁶ Bilal Khbeiz, 'Gaza–Beirut–Tel Aviv: In Praise of Selfishness and Opportunism', *e-flux journal*, no. 3, February 2009, accessed online, available HTTP: < <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/39>>.

⁵⁷ Bracha Ettinger, 'Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze', p. 89.

⁵⁸ Jacques Lacan, 'What is a Picture', in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1998 (1981), pp. 105–119 (115).

⁵⁹ Boris Groys, 'Art at War', in *Art Power*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008, pp. 120–122.

the images and narratives of violence and affliction. Both the spectacle and the embodied impact of the violent event now happen without the artist as a legitimate witness, and the occasional artist invited to 'depict' war 'live' only confirms the point, as classical draughtsmanship, or storytelling, or re-enactment for that matter,⁶⁰ prove far too weak as means of communicating affliction in comparison to the immediacy of the documentary video footage and the photographic image, and the 'liveness' of embedded journalism. Groys is clear as to the extent of this appropriation. 'The function of art as a medium of representation and the role of the artist as a mediator between reality and memory are here completely eliminated.'⁶¹ But the role of the artist as a mediator may not be the sole role the artists can take in relating and intervening in violence in society. Instead, we could again argue with McKenzie, that the creative, cultural performative analysis of violence is far better served by an awareness of violence as citation and in-citation, an awareness that the (highly volatile) potentiality for both the undoing and the affliction of violence (w) rests with its citationality, than with the definitive notions of 'the body' and 'the spectacle' as guarantors of stable systems of discourse.

Intimate (With) Violence

Another significant shift for this deliberation on the relationship between performance (art) and violence involves the fact that, as Groys reminds us, even the subversive, radical aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s art as an intervention into reality – and performance featured strongly in such radical interventions – have been appropriated and perverted in the videos and photographs produced by the terrorists and various army or paramilitary units. Groys stresses that the modern art's ambiguous relationship to violence, especially to terrorist, i.e. to individual and revolutionary violence, is crucially

⁶⁰ Groys characterises the artist as 'the last craftsperson of present-day modernity'. Ibid., p. 121.

⁶¹ Ibid.

linked to the avant-garde art discourse espousing military strategies in its demand for a radical, norm-breaking, tradition-erasing modern art, and in its struggle – understood as intrinsically violent – for the legitimacy of previously unconsidered artistic forms and procedures. What allows him to dismiss this apparent similarity between the radical artistic gesture and the radical terrorist image production is the indisputably iconoclastic nature of the former and the iconophilic investment of the image production of the latter. Nonetheless, Groys attaches great importance to this co-opting of the radical politics of the image by those who propagate violence. He sees it as a relatively new phenomenon in which the warrior no longer aspires for his / her idealised, glorifying image and instead chooses the strategy of ‘shock and awe’, ‘a pictorial strategy of intimidation’,⁶² thus changing the very premise of the critique of representation that has been driving the iconoclastic movement in the arts.

To move away from the deadlock of this ‘pictorial strategy of intimidation’, it is possible to trace a different history of iconoclasm in performance, exemplified by works that challenge the linking of art to violence that has become especially problematic, or rather bound into a predominant trope, in the context of performance and live art. As Jane Blocker reminds us in her ‘Aestheticizing Risk in Wartime’,⁶³ the artistic concern with violence can easily slip into the logic of ‘pride in risk taking’⁶⁴ that she sees as most evident in the literature on the 1960s and 1970s performance art but links to a longer lineage in the history of the ‘avant-garde’s long obsession with modes of transgression and cultural critique’⁶⁵ – a logic already so prevalent as to often remain unidentified and uncritiqued.

⁶² Ibid., p. 125.

⁶³ Jane Blocker, ‘Aestheticizing Risk in Wartime: The SLA to Iraq’, in *The Aesthetics of Risk*, Volume 3 of the SoCCAS [Southern California Consortium of Art Schools] symposia (expanded from symposium held on 29 April 2006), John C. Welchman (ed.). *The Aesthetics of Risk*, Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008 (pp. 190–223).

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 200.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

It is the logic of the trope of artist-as-risk-taker that Blocker sees at work in the shift in art discourse that after the disappointment of the radical politics of the 1960s tries to 'make art seem more closely affiliated with what are considered more legitimate categories of risk, such as violence, poverty, revolution, or racial discrimination.'⁶⁶ Alongside such legitimising gestures Blocker writes about, there was another more explicitly performance-based shift towards the spectacles of 'pure', 'real' violence, present in the works of radical theatre and performance makers of the late 1980s and early 1990s:

Some of today's theatre directors believe that only a discourse of the Real can actually touch the spectator [...] being touched appears to be conceivable only as physical touch; only the provocation of actual danger and actual corporeal pain seems capable of giving meaning or sense, and thereby sensation, to existence – a sense that only makes sense if it touches the spectator physically.⁶⁷

The violent events in former Yugoslavia during the 1990s for me arrived after my exposure to this performance tradition, especially to the work of the celebrated Catalan performance group La Fura dels Baus. In fact, the final performance of La Fura in former Yugoslavia, in Slovenia, staging an imaginary and extremely visceral war between two mad tribes of men in suits, took place at what soon became the outbreak of the actual war in the country. It was an outbreak that left artists, including the artist from La Fura, as shocked and unable to intervene, as uncomprehending as all other civilians caught in or in some way affected by those conflicts. So in that deep schism between violence as spectacle and the sinister violence in war, what does art's investment in provocation of actual danger and actual corporeal pain have to offer, and how equipped are we as artists and scholars of performance to deliver such meanings? Even if we are, is that a particular delivery that we really wish to make? Fusco's project demonstrated that modern military simulation

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Helga Finter, 'Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: the Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty', in Edward Scheer (ed.), *Antonin Artaud: a Critical Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 47–64 (50).

strategies have far exceeded the artistic ones in utilising the spectacle of simulated or actual danger and actual corporeal pain.

What may be a far more pertinent field in which to intervene is the sheer materiality of our entanglement in violence via trauma, complicated by the full implication of our living human bodies in these processes, bodies which in the extreme encounters with violence may be, as the performance scholar Judith Hamera remarks: ‘reduced to shades themselves, [...] both haunted registers of atrocity and avenging angels, impelled by other ghosts [...] to reimagine the generative possibilities of [a lost] culture’,⁶⁸ a description that hauntingly brings back to mind Milica Tomić’s project.

These are bodies at the very edges of their historicity, of their speaking back to and embodying history; the notion that ‘violence is a binding, affective experience that crosscuts the domains traditionally registered and distinguished as the physical, the psychic and the social’⁶⁹ evoked in *Violence Performed*, cannot even begin to bring to our awareness the complex implications of what Hamera will term ‘fraught relations’ between history, trauma and truth – the three interwoven ways in which violence is registered in the domains of the physical, the psychic and the social: history as the social narrativisation of violence, trauma as the – empty – psychic signifier of violence, and truth-as-fact, as the verifiable physical register of the violence performed.

I would like to argue that a change of focus has slowly been articulated after the period dominated by these highly visceral and spectacular performance pieces, an important shift in the relationship between art and risk, and art and violence among some artists working in performance and theatre, especially those linked to the sphere of live art. There has been increasing shift in the live art works towards performing intimacy by

⁶⁸ In her essay ‘The Answerability of Memory: “Saving” Khmer Classical Dance’, *TDR*, Winter 2002, vol. 46, no. 4: 65–85 (71). I address the essay in detail in Chapter Three.

⁶⁹ Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, *Violence Performed*, p. 5.

creating scenarios which variously suggest, imply, impose situations of explicit proximity to the bodies of others in performance. These works seem to move far beyond (or far closer than) these visceral, confrontational pieces. This happens first of all at the level in which the artists' own bodies and the bodies of all those participating, are totally and unavoidably invested in the work, so that the work is always what Ettinger has termed a co-poïesis; and, secondly, in the sense of urge(ncy), which from the very outset calls for an almost impossible act of trust on everybody's behalf – beginning already beyond the point of the variously negotiated, expected and accepted boundaries of social and personal interaction, at a perpetually shifting point where intimacy can no longer be deemed secure, familiar, controllable and therefore comfortable, where becoming intimate is already, inevitably, intimidating. If, as Phelan has written, '[i]dentity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and [...] is perceptible only through a relation to an other'⁷⁰ what is it that turns such intimidation brought about by this failure into the intimacy of our relations?

While much of the current topicality of intimacy would in a binary logic, in the logic of supplementarity, seem to imply an increasing, overpowering lack of intimate relations, and a need to 'reconnect' with some pre-conceived sense of community, something very different may be taking place, whereby as a form of engagement with art, the turn to intimacy is a profoundly ethical gesture; a gesture of an ethics that is, in Phelan's words, 'a statement of allegiance to the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming'⁷¹ as we begin to write, or perform, or engage with one-an-other. While various attacks on, negotiations or shifting of the boundaries of what of our intimacy is allowed to enter public space have been a permanent focus of much, if not most of the avant-garde art of the past century, the shift towards intimacy that has been happening is in what I personally like to think

⁷⁰ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 13.

⁷¹ Idem, *Mourning Sex*, p. 16.

of as a thoughtful and care-full, responsible act of abandoning the military origins of the term avant-garde – so that in place of confrontation the work of more and more artists offers a certain act of abandon, the already-inevitable scenario of total trust that consists in dropping their own ‘alibi’, the theatrical, or any other representational alibi. This simple act, whereas not necessarily directly provocative and ‘in-your-face’⁷² as much theatre and performance work of some previous eras, in fact allows far less space for negotiating the level of ‘investment’ in the work, which can be nothing short of ‘total’; for this work is an open act of love, and as such both the ultimately thrilling and the most terrifying experience. Most of my examples in the thesis follow this trajectory in performance and I hope to address some of its significant aspects in analysing them individually throughout the thesis.

It is in this sense that I have evoked in the text above the idea of dropping the alibi, what the theatre and performance scholar Alan Read has phrased, after Derrida, as ‘the collapse of the ubiquity of the theatrical alibi’ in the work of live artists.⁷³ To understand this concept better it is important not to forget that alibi in Latin means ‘somewhere else’, and that being ‘somewhere else’ is the legal premise for claiming innocence, before the law but also as in the flight of imagination. And however problematic status of ‘being there’ remains in relation to (live) art events, they certainly no longer offer this premise of innocence, this alibi of ‘being somewhere else’ as we engage with the workings of imagination. This, I would argue, happens above all because the artist does not collapse the alibi ‘into himself, his self’ as Read would suggest, but collapses it on-to us, even literally ‘collapsing’ into our arms, as the performance artist Kira O’Reilly had done when

⁷² Cf. Aleks Sierz, *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

⁷³ Alan Read, ‘Say Performance: Some Suggestions Regarding Live Art’, in Adrian Heathfield (ed.), *Live: Art and Performance*, London: Tate Publishing, 2004, pp. 242–247 (244). Read was referring specifically to the work of Oleg Kulik.

she invited her audience to hold her naked body in their lap after they cut-it-if-they-will.⁷⁴

So to turn the ethical demand around, my question would be what does this theoretical engagement with violence teach us about performativity itself? For as much as we may feel equipped or indeed obligated to engage in our writing with the performativity of violence, what is it that we do as we inevitably re-introduce speech / language / signification around violence? And, in doing so, when do we know we are not ‘verbalizing [our] moral impulses out of existence?’ To answer this, I feel it is far more urgent to dislocate ourselves, not to perpetuate what the warring discourses are already doing by further locating / describing / witnessing the events that ‘misery comes from’ but to focus on very problematic of witnessing violence; as Blocker argues in her *Seeing Witness* not on ‘how to bear witness’⁷⁵ but on who is it who bears this witness. Blocker understands the subject position of the witness as a position of privilege that we must reflect on in our writing and art making.

Where this subject position can shift into a place of wit(h)ness is in the materiality of our writing and artistic strategies, in our aesthetic choices and the degree to which they will be able to expose the contingency of violence, its messiness, the way it is driven by banal and arbitrary but also highly sinister motives. I also do not agree that to do this the artists should necessarily ‘focus not on the unfolding tragedy itself but on the ways it is being presented, reported, perceived and metaphorized by other dominant discourses.’⁷⁶ Such strategy of debunking dominant discourses and the violent way in which they over-write ‘history’ onto an ‘unfolding tragedy’ is a vital part of the critique of representation

⁷⁴I am referring here to Kira O’Reilly’s *Untitled Action* performed at the NRLA, The Arches, Glasgow, in 2005. While I will not discuss this piece in the thesis, I will analyse extensively a more recent performance by O’Reilly in Chapter Five.

⁷⁵Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness*, p. xix.

⁷⁶Dragan Klaić, ‘The Crisis in Theatre? The Theatre in Crisis!’ in Maria Delgado and Caridad Svich (eds), *Theatre in Crisis: Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, pp. 144–160 (160).

linked to violent events. However, as an approach it easily plays into the in-citational logic of the spectacle and serves to further displace the catastrophic consequences of violence, reinforcing the 'reverential silence' that keeps the volatile affectivity violence produces safely at bay. To move away from this binary of the spectacle and the silent, arrested life, the ethical call of address in our engagement with the questions of violence must itself be performed:

The crucial problem of the moral law is not the variability of the situations to which we 'apply' it, but the place or role of the subject in its very constitution [...] That which can in no way be reduced without abolishing ethics as such is not the multicoloured variability of every given situation, but the gesture by which every subject, by means of his actions, posits the universal, performs a certain operation of universalization.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, New York, London: Verso, 2000, p. 61.

Chapter Three

Burning Bridges: Imagination and Exile

Prologue

The time is the beginning of the war, the girl must be an acting student, although we never ask; she has escaped and is probably waiting for an opportunity to emigrate. The place is a rundown city theatre, now home to one of the rare 'independently' run theatre groups that has offered shelter to actors passing through this town at the northernmost border of the former country. This 'independence' would turn sour in the years that followed, and be exchanged for an open share of power inside the warmongers' government but that is part of a different history and a different kind of loss... The war has started but in this part of the country reactions are limited to public demonstrations and individual voices of protest while theatres are mostly continuing with their repertoires as if nothing is happening.

I never see the girl except dressed in full costume: black baggy trousers, white shirt, black ragged jacket, large shabby shoes, dark hair with a short cut which I do not really recall, and a fake moustache; a carefully enacted cross-dressing impersonation of Charlie Chaplin, unsmiling. Her presence is eerie. It is not the uncanny likeness, nor her seriousness as such that are startling, but the fact that she does not seem to be acting this Chaplin at all; that her appearance, so meticulously carried out, is not aimed to be looked at, or rather it appears entirely indifferent to our gaze. She is working on an etude, perhaps simply to pass her time, to stay in shape as an athlete would have done in her situation, making sure she would remain agile while also attempting to come to terms with the enormity of her circumstance.

We never approach her, we leave her be as one intuitively does with those who are

in mourning, for although we are in a theatre and there are many people rehearsing, her attentive lingering onto her appearance carries a different weight altogether.

There is nothing special in what the girl's 'character' does. Most of the time she seems to be going about her business, carrying out movements that do not call to mind anything one remembers of Chaplin's actions, at least not in any obvious manner; this is the comedian outside the spotlight, in her/his own space-time, absorbed in her/his own private gestures, yet so clearly recognisable that the force of this double illusion, the appearance and its simultaneous apparent negation, is all the more disquieting.

Nothing in the girl's gestures indicates effort, her blending with the looks of the famous comedian is almost perfect but it is again neither her technical prowess as such that is fascinating, nor the dubious metaphoric value of her etude given the times. What remains with me is the force of the affect her enactment carries. It is immediate, and disturbing. It solicits no comment and leaves one embarrassingly exposed. It is as if she emptied her masked looks of all intention only to inhabit them all the more fully, and to no other end but to test how much of the horror of her unsolicited knowledge of our shared catastrophe those unfamiliar yet so ubiquitously known features would take, and she with-in them. And she did that carefully, not with a reckless abandon of one who has resigned all control but on the contrary, with an awareness of one dispassionately studying her own loss-in-apparition.

Undoing the S/cr(i/y)pt

I am not sure where to place this memory-in-writing. It was a scene observed for some days in Subotica, a town in what was then Yugoslavia, in the late summer of 1992, after the siege of Sarajevo had already begun and some students from the Sarajevo Theatre Academy who managed to escape from the city stayed with a group of theatre makers at the National Theatre in Subotica before leaving the country. I was a student myself, visiting

the theatre from Belgrade. I never spoke to the young actress whose work I have described here. It is difficult to say for sure after such a long time that my memory of her is in any way accurate. It is not a story about the war. It is certainly far less remarkable than many stories of individual experiences in those times. It is also not a report of a remarkable performance. There were other, far more pronounced, more elaborate instances of theatre-making going on there at the time. It is an anecdote, a persistent sequence of real-life spectatorial experience; particular, somewhat disturbing, private moments witnessed with a mixture of professional curiosity, powerlessness, desire to help, embarrassment; an unsolicited witnessing and an unresolved memory.

And yet, what I will try to articulate in my writing in this chapter is something of the nature of that persistence, something in her performance exercise, and the context in which I observed it, that touched on a significant principle, a counter-intuitive sort of answer to my thesis' key question about the nature of creative witness, of the way art, and performance in particular, bears witness to trauma.

The fact that the girl's personal loss fashioned itself so obviously as the most commonplace comedy figure¹ could easily have provided an opening for a highly predictable event, a sort of a metaphor for war and the tragicomedy of the place of our humanity in it; but even if she undertook the exercise with such an intention in mind, the betrayal of her performative persona to even attempt to deliver the metaphor revealed something far more disjointed about the relationship between art and trauma.

This failure may partly be explained through the context of the girl's most immediate situation, of her waiting in one of the many hiatuses involved in the intricate journeys of exile, in spaces where identities become dangerously suspended. With her own identity

¹ And a figure that was foreign, not belonging to the immediate, tragic reality she had found herself in but to a 'freer' Western world the icons of which her, by then already former country used to parade as proof of its apparent freedom as opposed to the countries of the Russian sphere of dominance.

suspended by an act of violence, the very parameters of her craft as a play with identities became dramatically undone. And yet what she did in response brought a strange shift to what in Agamben's terms would mark her fall from the political identity of the citizen to the precarious zone of bare life, the zone of the destabilisation of identity that also marks the crisis of art in trauma.

That shift in the young actress's response was a certain action of ghosting, a dispassionate exercise done with a sense of commitment mixed with abandon that one could observe but was not invited to look at, and was perhaps instead forced to witness. And it is not easy to describe just what this ghosting was that so changed the circumstances of her performative exercise-in-survival. It was as if, by withdrawing the basic premise of performing a fictional role, the basic empathic rule for all 'good' pretence of an appearance – that it is there for me, for an audience, to see, to be and rest upon – she opened an abyss that threatened to take all the seemingly more stable identities with her down the hollow of those looks.

The affective force of that abyss, however, was not a deadening negativity; on the contrary, it carried a sense of promise despite, or perhaps because of its very refusal to identify; a sense of a perhaps terrible but simple truth amidst exaggerated and increasingly complicated effort to sustain 'normality', including the 'normality' of fiction or of 'good art' at a time so profoundly and violently, purposefully unhinged from normality. Perhaps the simple truth I learned from the girl's unassuming creative act was that war needed no reflection in performance, or rather that a performer cannot, need not strive to reflect death for the living, be that the reflection of material, physical deaths of others, or of the disintegration of complex living networks of identities and connected lives. This is not to say, as many artists in the country were reiterating at the time, that art was meant to stick to its exalted ideal of autonomy, on the contrary. The paradox was, and remains, far more

simple but difficult to behold. Our shame at the enormity and the complexity of our own subjection/s, heightened by the most basic existential fears or simply vested existential interests in war, does not come undone through any such acts of reflection and relay. Even when engaging highly experimental forms, any such attempt seems to fail exactly to the extent that it remains bound to reflective models of subject-object relations between reality and fiction, the real and the artistic gesture, self and the body.

Between the real as traumatic and the imaginary as both opaque and entirely transparent, the girl's Chaplin performance shaped itself as an act of ghosting and not of reflection, a doubling of stark appearance with an all-but-total withdrawal of embeddedness of that appearance in any stable framework, either fictional or real.

Such a destabilising move that unhinges identities and questions the foundational nature of subjectivity is a productive formal strategy, well researched and characteristic of a number of self-reflective works of contemporary live art. However, the specificity of that young actress's gesture, and indeed of her circumstance, allowed for the sort of disregard and removal of performer-audience relationship that would be inconceivable, or simply contrived in most performance situations. In that removal, in her accidental happening, the unselfconscious seeping of her costumed appearance into the everyday was not a premeditated act of witness but a letting go of an overwhelming material affect. As a form of happening, it was perhaps more of a blurring of art and death than of art and life, but as such it allowed some of that overwhelming affect to dissipate without visible effort, almost with the simplicity of a natural law. And if I dare compare the affective workings of her durational action to a far more premeditated and complex artwork perhaps it would be to Allan Kaprow's 1967 *Fluids* happening, recently re-done in a number of locations, in which Kaprow, with the help of volunteers, built about twenty rectangular enclosures of ice blocks throughout the Los Angeles area and then left them to melt. The girl's 'frozen'

mimesis, her masked appearance and its mimetic duration, similarly allowed for the walls of our shared somatic shock to remain ‘unbroken’ and yet ‘left to melt’, to echo the text from Kaprow’s poster for *Fluids*.

I will return now to the far starker example I introduced in Chapter Two,² Hamera’s essay ‘The Answerability of Memory: “Saving” Khmer Classical Dance’, to help me analyse further this unforeseen (for me) aspect of the relation of mimicry to testimonial gesture, of the relationship between mimesis and the memory of atrocity. In ‘The Answerability of Memory’, Hamera describes her complex witnessing / fieldwork with a couple of Cambodian refugees, classical Khmer dancers and survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide, named in her text as Ben and May Sem. Hamera worked with them between 1990 and 1992 in the Los Angeles area, where the couple and their children lived at the time. The two dancers, who had lost all contact with their teachers and colleagues and had no certainty how many, or whether any of their fellow dancers had survived, engaged in daily practice of their ancient dance form that requires the body of the dancer, and especially of the female dancer, to become, as Hamera writes: ‘the narrative container for the cosmos, a microcosm of myriad nuanced interrelationships between the physical and the spiritual.’³ In order to act as such a ‘narrative container’ the dancers must learn to empty their gestures / body languages of personal history, much in the manner performing body always lends itself to the formal vocabularies of dance and to the fictions of character, or simply to the fact of performing before an audience. However, in the case of these highly taxing and strict dance forms performed by dancers whose bodies are moulded and trained from a very young age, the demand on the individual bodies to be subsumed by the appearance is almost without remainder. What Hamera observes is the repeated failure of the Sem couple to live up to this demand; an incommensurability of the idealised forms of their celestial dance and

² Cf. Chapter Two, p. 79.

³ Judith Hamera, ‘The Answerability of Memory’, p. 78.

their fragile bodies of refugees: two ghostly forms that seem to ‘etch themselves over and over onto each other, again and again, always incompletely, always in difference.’⁴

Once again, as with the young actress’s Chaplin figure, the Sem couple’s mimetic mastery changed profoundly in the wake of atrocity. For them as well, their skill became something of an anchor, a sacred, embodied knowledge that remained with them after their past lives were lost. In their case, however, rather than offer a conduit or shape to their loss, even if – or especially because – voided of representational content, the strictly codified visual language of their dance with its profound disciplining of the body and mind could not allow them to grieve, could not transform into a ‘mourner’s dance.’⁵ Having lost the traditional context to their dance, the Sems lost not only an audience with intimate, deep knowledge of their form, most importantly they lost their stable identities as dancers. Their form, predicated on an ideal, on the sacralisation and universalisation of the human spirit over and above the specificities of living circumstance, left no space for the expression of the contingencies of their personal histories, let alone such total destabilisation of their identities as brought about by the trauma of prison and exile.

This chapter traces the frayed relations between material performance culture and the highly charged space of exile and communal loss. I will later on in the chapter analyse two contemporary works where these questions are tackled through a radical overhaul of their respective artistic forms but for now I am interested in what Hamera describes as ‘a peculiar relationship between a classical form and a fraught subject.’⁶ How are performing bodies changed as creative agents when they are marked by such profound losing of ground, of their embodied histories? What does it mean for artists to create without disowning the

⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵ Mourner’s Dance is the title of the recent and ongoing project of the artist Doran George. ‘The Mourner’s Dance’ was also the title of George’s residency at the Chisenhale Dance Space in London in April 2008.

⁶ Judith Hamera, ‘The Answerability of Memory’, p. 74.

aporia of loss in exile? Where is the space for this work to happen with-in – or does it always necessarily at least to some degree remain with-out – the space/s of their host societies? How are the social spaces and identities of these host societies changed by these new ghostly presences? Whereas the proliferation of hybrid art forms shows the wealth of ways these questions can be tackled creatively, the loss of classical forms and techniques, for a long time welcomed and actively pursued in the arts, returns in-difference in these ghostly forms. The Ben couple seemed dangerously locked into their grief. And yet, at the very end of her article, as she describes a younger generation of Cambodian refugee families at a performance by Khmer classical dance students at the California State University, Long Beach, in a packed theatre and in an atmosphere of ‘exuberance, communal celebration, prosperity – everything the Sem family could not access or mobilize,’⁷ Hamera conjures her own ghost, that of seeing May Sem at her kitchen table, to reach the completion of her research and of the personal history she shared and could not conclude, could not resolve, with the Sem family. The Sems left Los Angeles without contacting Hamera or in any way helping her ‘narrate what [her] interlocutors knew and couldn’t and wouldn’t tell, and what [she] learned, or figured out, and couldn’t or wouldn’t tell.’⁸ Hamera concludes that the exuberance and beauty of that other, recuperative performance, the jubilation of the younger generation of Cambodians who were able to move away from the difficult, indeed deadening space of loss, needed this newly etched form, the story of the Sem family to ‘be, somehow, complete.’⁹ Or was it the ghost of the Sem family that needed to etch itself onto the exuberance and beauty of that life to stop haunting Hamera?

Although the Sem couple’s mastery of a classical form proved incommensurable with the profoundly traumatic experience they underwent as individual people, and seemed

⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

detrimental to their survival in drastically changed circumstances, the ambiguousness at the end of Hamera's essay points to the complex nature of this ghostly mimicry and its haunting presence that will not resolve itself either in the positive or in the negative, in either of the possible variations that would answer to what Hamera herself recognises as her own '[h]ope for a happy ending'¹⁰ to their story of survival in life and in art.

Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of answerability is one of the key terms Hamera introduces in her essay to theorise the ambiguousness of the space Ben and May Sem struggled in vain to occupy:

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. But answerability entails guilt, or liability to blame. It is not only mutual answerability that art and life must assume, but also mutual ability to blame. [...] Art and life are not one, but they must become united in the unity of my answerability.¹¹

The notion of answerability lies at the heart of what Bakhtin conceives of as an ethical response in a lived experience, a complex architecture of relations between art and life by which the 'pernicious non-fusion and non-interpenetration of culture and life could be surmounted'.¹² A crucial structural link between art and life in Bakhtin's concept of answerability, or response-ability, consists of the unique place of each subject in the world, for which only that subject is called and able to answer. Although the idea of answerability and this subject position appears problematic in that it may appear to indicate an ultimate authority that is larger than and separate from an equally rigidly defined subject,¹³ Bakhtin's radically situated ethics does not in fact posit its subject as

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (eds), *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Vadim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, pp. 1-2, cited in Hamera, 'The Answerability of Memory', p. 74.

¹² Idem (eds), *M. M. Bakhtin: Towards a Philosophy of the Act*. Trans. and notes by Vadim Liapunov, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, p. 3.

¹³ Some scholars have somewhat problematically interpreted the notion of unity in Bakhtin as suggestive of the union of the divine and human principles, as argued for example by Alexandar Mihailović in his *Corporeal words: Mikhail Bakhtin's theology of discourse*, Northwestern University

separate, and either self-sufficient or subordinate to an outside law, but as particular and situated, an impermanent locus of a dialogical process. Bakhtin's theory abolishes the subject-object dichotomy while insisting that art as '[my] active deed [...] is not simply an affirmation of myself or simply an affirmation of actual Being, but a non-fused and undivided [...] affirmation of myself in Being'.¹⁴ Significantly for my argument in the thesis, Bakhtin theorises ethics as a physical, material, almost a physiological process. And once again, although situating ethics so close to a physiology could be seen to limit ethics to a kind of biological determinism, with punishments conveniently meted out through the affective registers of guilt and blame, Bakhtin's insistence on the materiality and situatedness of ethics and his notion of dialogic polyphony may be interpreted more complexly in light of Ettinger's theory of the matrixial stratum of subjectivity, in which the complex affective strings and threads that constitute our first living connections and 'dialogue' with another partial subjectivity, connections of non-fusion and undividedness, are examined through a feminist and psychoanalytical lens and create significant openings for theorising a somatic, affective ethics for art and performance.

In the case of the Sem couple, the dramatic displacement and crisis of the traditional notions of both subjectivity and culture in exile captures a further complex dynamic of dialogism and answerability that reveals a deep ambivalence in the relationship between art and life, which, as Hamera suggests, can be both generative, indicating 'an ethical opportunity to deploy art to speak back' – and impotent, 'circumscrib[ing] agency, limiting it to re-actions of singular subjects condemned to answer to, or "rent" meaning'.¹⁵ For Ben and May Sem, the pairing of art with answerability exposed the deceptive promise of art

Press, 1997; likewise, the affective register of guilt and blame may be seen as a Kafkaesque kind of legal absurdity in which the subject is called upon to answer for herself through art in the name of a bureaucratic, vacant 'life'.

¹⁴ M. M. Bakhtin, in Holquist and Liapunov, (eds), *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, p. 41.

¹⁵ Hamera, 'The Answerability of Memory', p. 74.

as an answer to trauma and a 'return' to life from a situation of exile that so precipitously approaches death in traditional societies where identities are profoundly local, grounded in notions of rootedness and an embodied culture:

[T]he man who is exiled for all time from the place where his social group has its home, ceases to form a part of it. As far as it is concerned he is dead, more really dead than if he had simply ceased to live, and had received the customary funeral rites [...] Thus it is that permanent exile means the same thing as death.¹⁶

The sense of migration as anomaly, or indeed as death, and of culture as profoundly rooted to a particular place, rooted in land, has itself become something of an anomaly in the contemporary world of shifting identities and increasing migrations, however, this does not at all mean that the influence, particularly political influence, of territorial concepts of identity and culture have ceased to be of critical importance. Liisa Malkki¹⁷ is one of the authors who have unpacked these seemingly natural notions of identity as predicated on location and territory. She sees these processes as a way of naturalising the ties between people and territories understood as partitioned and disparate space/s, where botanical metaphors of rootedness and of land reflect and promote a 'metaphysical sedimentarism',¹⁸ a sense of inevitability of territorialised culture and of identity as ultimately located in a national discourse, as territorialised culture becomes in effect so crucially tied to the concept of the nation. On the other hand, the notion of embodied culture, more resonant with Bakhtin in removing the locus of culture from the land to the body as the unique site of the dialogical process, opens a further crisis in as much as that body may still be seen as a 'vehicle' of art and life, as a highly disciplined means and conduit for artistic expertise

¹⁶ Lucien Lévy-Brühl, *The Primitive Mentality*, trans. Lilian A. Clare. New York: Macmillan 1923, p. 214.

¹⁷ Cf. Liisa H. Malkki, 'National geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees', *Cultural Anthropology*, 1992, vol. 7, no. 1: 24–44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

and for the preservation of cultural memory, and not a living system with its own unique ontogenetic history.¹⁹

Neither the mimetic abandon of the young actress's Chaplin figure, nor the mimetic failure of the Sem couple's ancient dance offered an answer to an already presupposed life; moreover, as both were performances in / of exile they could not harbour much hope for a life as their protagonists knew it. Although performing their respective forms with great skill, they also continually failed to 'deliver', failed to reproduce a desired, original, 'ideal' presence. And while this seems to place their performances in an uncomfortable position in relation to both life and art, there is something to be gained from this dislocation, from this proximity to death that so obviously contaminates their art / life understood as an answerable present and a presence without a remainder. For even as their performances fail to provide answers to a damaged life, there is possibility in this failure to leave behind the guilt and blame that in Bakhtin's vision of the artist form the affective pathways between art and the living reality.

What their mimetic departure from such an ideal, answerable present suggests more acutely is a strangely changed figure of the mime, which Derrida brings forth in his textual analysis of Stéphane Mallarmé's short text 'Mimique'. In Derrida's reading, mime does not rely on any pre-existing reality for his performance: 'He represents nothing, imitates nothing, does not have to conform to any prior referent with the aim of achieving adequation or verisimilitude.'²⁰ However, Derrida warns, '[t]here is mimicry.'²¹ The result of the mime's departure from representation is not a return to the logic of reappropriation of writing (or performance) for any originary metaphysics of truth via a removal of mimicry

¹⁹ I will engage in detail with the notion of ontogenetic history in Chapter Five.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'The Double Session' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 205.

²¹ Ibid., p. 206, emphasis in original.

from the operations of adequation, it is not to say that mimicry has disappeared, for the mime's is a far more complex operation:

We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double.²²

Lacking the mime's apparent freedom of choice in non-conforming to a referent – although Derrida further on in the text shifts the proposed freedom noting how 'for this double [...] reality, indeed, is death. It will prove to be inaccessible [...]'²³ – the young actress's and Ben and May Sem's mimicry instead involuntarily and inevitably exposes the traumatic loss of referent. If their performances are likewise 'a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh, wandering about without a past, without any death, birth, or presence',²⁴ these wanderers, in 'illustrating nothing'²⁵ seem to illustrate too much, seem to gather the ghosts of too many other, inaccessible deaths. What Derrida refers to as Mallarméan displacement, that peculiar attentiveness to mimicry without referent, in their performances seems locked into melancholic attachment. However, if we allow the ghosts of these performances a kinder reading, such melancholic attachment need not be seen as deadening to creativity, need not be resolved, left behind, in order for their story to 'be complete'. It may already hold in itself a potential opening to life for their creativity, debris from which can develop a certain performance of 'melancholic excess'.²⁶

It is not easy to contemplate how such an excess of melancholia in the performances of the young actress's mime or Ben and May Sem's dance could in itself form a starting point for a creative gesture. What makes it particularly difficult is their shared situation of

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 208.

²⁶ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (eds), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 5. I will discuss the notion of melancholic excess in detail further on in the chapter.

exile that seems to double their loss, making their pasts and their cultures both temporally and spatially painfully inaccessible. Hamera is aware of the precariousness of the situation of refugees, who face: 'two types of immanent and imminent threats simultaneously: the threat of the disappearance of the homeland and the threat of themselves disappearing in the host society [...].'²⁷ The US-based, exiled Iranian film and media theorist Hamid Naficy, whose comment on the two simultaneous threats Hamera cites here, warns against a common and dangerous strategy among refugees resulting from a hastened desire to circumvent both of these overwhelming threats, a strategy of either a fetishisation of the past and of lost identities, or a forced mimesis, an insistence on 'fitting in' to their new environment. However, both of these mimetic gestures – both the holding on to a fixed notion of a past identity and the apparent abandonment of a former self behind an appearance of blending with their host environment – can be disentangled from their presupposed referentiality and any pretensions at adequation. Thus transformed, they can begin to point instead to 'a continuous engagement with loss and its remains',²⁸ where the ghost-like, tainted presence, the 'otherness' of refugees in host societies may be seen not as a problem to be resolved but as an occasion for a growing and complex awareness of difference, of irresolvable and already present multiple temporalities and territorialities. It may thus offer the possibility to rethink both the notion of society, and of the stable cultures and identities that seem to dwell securely within its protected borders.

In his 1994 text 'We Refugees' Agamben argues, following Hannah Arendt, that the refugee 'who has lost all rights, yet stops wanting to be assimilated at any cost to a new national identity so as to contemplate his condition lucidly, receives, in exchange for certain unpopularity, an inestimable advantage'.²⁹ That advantage, Agamben will suggest,

²⁷ Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, cited in Hamera, p. 75.

²⁸ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss*, p. 4.

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, 'We Refugees', trans. Michael Rocke, online access, available HTTP:

consists in opening a possibility in the social structure where the refugee becomes an uncomfortable presence, for a paradigmatic change of historical consciousness from the stable identities of nationhood to what Agamben sees as a parallel topographical territory that ‘retroact[s]’ to the territory of the state thus making its exterior and interior indeterminate, opening up a possibility for societies where the guiding principle will ‘no longer be the ius of the citizen, but rather the refugium of the individual’. In contemplating how a similar paradigmatic change occurs with regard to culture, the uncomfortable, awkward presence of these misplaced, ‘emptied’ mimetic forms of dance and performance may similarly be seen to create a parallel topography that can retroact on accepted notions of culture and render what belongs inside or outside of the cultural sphere indeterminate and thus potentially open to change. It is this possibility that I am proposing in the thesis.

And whereas there exists a plethora of highly complex works of dance and performance that engage these principles – Japanese Butoh being one pertinent example, the dance of ‘joyous despair’, an embrace of emptiness of / in mimesis rather than a revivifying or transposition of any ideal past or distant form – I have consciously chosen not to turn to these established and well researched examples in my analysis and instead remain as close as possible to the indeterminacy, and thus also to the potentiality of the sphere of crisis, both in my writing and in the choice of works and cultural practices I am examining in the chapter, and in the thesis as a whole.

The theoretical motion of designating any historical, contingent identities for the purpose of producing paradigms is not unproblematic,³⁰ but Agamben is not alone in contemplating the paradigmatic figure of the non-citizen. For the French philosopher

<<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-we-refugees.html>>. Originally published in *Symposium*, Summer 1995, vol. 49, no. 2: 114–119. All citations refer to the online version of the essay.

³⁰ This is a criticism that Agamben addresses explicitly in his lecture on the paradigm that I analyse in Chapter Two.

Alain Badiou, the *sans papiers*, people without valid French work papers or legal status, normally erased from the political and social life of France, are similarly seen to occasion what Badiou terms the moment of truth, where truth is theorised as radically new, a process in the real arising out of the seemingly known situation through a sudden appearance and acknowledgment of an unknowable and indiscernible element already present but dormant in a given situation, in this case by the presence (without representation) of the *sans papiers*. Such truth requires an acknowledgement; it requires a decision, a fidelity by the virtue of which a subject states that an event, something supplemental to what is calculable and knowable in a given situation, has taken place. It is only through such acknowledgement, then, that truth can appear, and the possibility for a change open through an ‘eruption’, an inscription of such an undiscerned and indiscernible element into the given situation, when these people are no longer considered ‘as subtracted elements of the situation “France” but rather as human beings that, like French citizens, occupy the same place.’³¹ I wonder what gesture of fidelity would have similarly occasioned the events of these two ‘failed’ performances I have introduced in the chapter, would have allowed them to become artistic events in Badiou’s sense in their given situations.

Instead of an elaborate search for an answer, a simple acknowledgment of these unknowable presences in their respective new environments could have transformed the anthropological meeting between the Western scholar and the traditional dancers from the East, and indeed between myself and the young performer from the story at the beginning

³¹ This much too brief expose elaborates Badiou’s key propositions from his lecture ‘The Event of Truth’ given at the European Graduate School, available as a lecture ‘On the Truth-Process: An open lecture by Alain Badiou, August 2002’, European Graduate School, online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/badiou/badiou-truth-process-2002.html>>. The citation at the end of the paragraph is taken from the analysis of Badiou’s theorising of *sans papiers* by the philosopher Sam Gillespie in Sam Gillespie, ‘Giving Form to Its Own Existence’, p.181.

of the chapter, from efforts at interpretation and adequation to occasions of truth as a life-changing experience.

These failures of responsiveness, of responsibility understood not as a guilt-driven answerability but an ability to move and be moved by an event, reveal a paradox in the nature of both any human and any artistic act. For in as much as such an act is of necessity premeditated, a result of an intention, it continually misses the time of the event:

The singular presence of “what takes place” *takes the place of* the performative, and mocks it, displaces it, and supersedes it. In other terms, the event disarms the performative by effectively removing its capacity to respond. The event leaves the act “speechless”.³²

This insistence on how the performative is disarmed by the event is the dance theoretician Mark Franko’s answer to the question about what would be an adequate response in the form of dance and performance to the events of the 9/11 in New York. The speechlessness of the act, the missing time of the response, is what marks both the crisis and the potentiality of the event, both the trauma of the missed encounter with the real and the awakening to the truth of that missed encounter.

In his article ‘Giving Form to Its Own Existence: Anxiety and the Subject of Truth’, Gillespie elaborates the links of the key terms of Badiou’s theory to Lacan’s psychoanalysis, especially to the notion of the real, and of anxiety. Badiou’s philosophical project, Gillespie argues, based on the mathematisation of ontology and thus necessitating a certain disregard for personal experience, cannot really account for the notion of affect. In an attempt to introduce affect to Badiou’s theory, Gillespie’s essay links Badiou’s truth procedure to Lacan’s notion of anxiety in order to account for how ‘subjects are gripped by events’,³³

³² Mark Franko, ‘Given Movement: Dance and the Event’, in André Lepecki (ed.), *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on dance and performance theory*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004, pp. 113–123 (116), emphasis in original.

³³ Sam Gillespie, ‘Giving Form to Its Own Existence’, p. 167.

which would be the only possible way to theorise the place of subject as a possible catalyst for action, the necessary condition of fidelity to the event.

Badiou's truth procedure is viewed in the article through the framework of how a subject relates to its own real, to what Lacan's theory would designate as that which is radically outside language, as subject's indiscernible being. The aspect that links Badiou's truth procedure to the analytical situation, Gillespie proposes, is that in analysis the subject similarly does not uncover a pre-existent truth but in the process of analysis shapes 'the indiscernible being that grounds [his/her] anxiety'.³⁴ It is not the affects of fear and pity, the ultimate emotions of an Aristotelian aesthetic of theatre, that unlock the truth of any artistic event (or the event of love, or of politics, which, together with science form the four fields of truth, four domains of subjectivation for Badiou), but anxiety.

Lacan, although not engaging much explicitly with affect in his theory, saw anxiety as the only affect we can be sure of, while all other affects that form our emotional responses can be deceiving: 'What we fear or pity is conventionally what is other to us: in contrast, what arouses our anxiety is altogether intimate to us'.³⁵

Badiou himself proposes that analysis is a truth procedure:

To speak brutally, I do not think that analysis is an interpretation, because it is regulated not by sense, but by truth. This is certainly not an uncovering of truth, of which we know that it is vain to think it could be uncovered, because it is generic.³⁶

Where Badiou's effort to equate the analytical truth with his own notion of generic truth fails to be compatible with Lacan is that for Lacan the process of analysis, as a process helping individual subjects relate to their *jouissance*, cannot result in a truth that would be universal and generic, for to universalise *jouissance* would mean to abnegate it. Badiou's

³⁴ Ibid., p. 182.

³⁵ Sam Gillespie, 'Giving Form to Its Own Existence', p. 180.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 182 (from Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, Paris: Seuil, 1992, p. 208, now also available in English: Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, Steven Corcoran (trans.), Continuum, 2008).

truth procedure, Gillespie argues, 'is the process through which that subjective excess passes over from being a purely subjective principle (qua the real of *jouissance*) into something that holds for a collective human situation in its totality (qua generic being of a truth)'.³⁷ This generic nature of truth is far too complex a notion to be analysed in this context³⁸ but why Gillespie's project is significant is that it places itself and, importantly for my argument also places the arts at the point where this movement from the individual subject's *jouissance*, its most intimate approximation of an encounter with its Being, can become moved and move towards universal and generic truth: 'Nothing at the level of universalizability can define the trajectory of the subject in response to something that has the power to form collective subjects out of individuals. A theory of what creates those subjective formations is what I am looking for in psychoanalysis.'³⁹ And, we could perhaps also say, nothing in the collectivity of subjects, or in psychoanalysis as a theoretical system, can reach such formations that were not already mocked, displaced and disarmed by the real, by the unnamable, unlimited supplement to any totality in its tendency towards totalitarianism or total knowledge.

Dramaturgies of Loss

The move from subject to collectivity in Badiou's theorising of generic truth indicates a totality present only in anticipation, 'not as a *real* totalization but as a *fiction*'.⁴⁰ Indeed, Badiou warns against the temptation to force a total knowledge from what he deems the necessary forcing to give a name to all elements of a situation, present in the moments

³⁷ Ibid., p. 183.

³⁸ For an excellent introduction see Sam Gillespie, 'Beyond Being: Badiou's Doctrine of Truth', *Communication & Cognition*, special issue 'The True is Always New', Dominiek Hoens (ed.), vol. 36, no. 1–2, 2003: 5–30.

³⁹ Sam Gillespie, 'Giving Form to Its Own Existence', p. 178.

⁴⁰ 'On the Truth-Process: An open lecture by Alain Badiou, August 2002', European Graduate School.

of generating the new. This drive towards an omnipotence of truth is where Badiou locates evil, so that evil is not something separate or in any way securely kept from truth but is immanent to that truth, necessitating an ethics accepting and aware of such immanent possibility of ‘the destruction of the condition of truth itself, because it’s the destruction of the real point of the field [...] Truth is always the possibility of its proper destruction.’⁴¹ This delicate balance of a movement anticipating totality is where performance can take place – perhaps not unlike what Ettinger describes as ‘the transport-station of trauma’. By resisting the pull to ‘total knowledge’, the artist works at the point where subjective excess seeps into the social affective field. In a way this makes the artists’ position particularly vulnerable as they always find themselves balancing between being overwhelmed by that excess and / or being put in the service of totalising, ideological gestures, a danger that can only be undone in the shaping of the particularities of the work’s affective truths, in a certain choreography of art’s resistance, by which the artist re-marks both the fiction of an anticipation of totality, and the very limitations of its actualisation.

What theory does in highly abstract terms performance makes painfully close to the ‘real point of the field’ of truth. Thus in the context of exile, where philosophers would like to argue the refugee’s position as an advantage, artists re-mark the painful gaps of its realities, gaps re-marked also by feminist theorists, such as Caren Kaplan who challenges the theoretical proposition that such unhinged identities are an advantage and a chance for a radical change of politics: ‘Who dares let go of their respective representations and systems of meaning, their identity politics and theoretical homes, when it is, as Kafka rightly noted, “a matter of life and death here?”’⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Caren Kaplan, ‘Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse’, Abdul R. JanMohammed and David Lloyd (eds), *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 357–368 (361).

An example of a harsh actualisation of the problematic dynamic of exile, of the diasporic, fractured identities and the location of desire may be read in the work of Tanja Ostojić, a Serbian artist now based in Germany. Ostojić's *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* (2000-2002) is described as a 'Wedding Book interactive web project, series of situationistic performances and work in the media of law in large part executed in collaboration with Klemens Golf'.⁴³ Even in its description, the project brazenly does away with any disciplining in terms of its medium, starting already from a complex series of strategies that move from an intervention into the 'real' virtual space of personal web advertisements via a carefully fabricated artefact – a personal ad, and then move to the medium of performance, subsequently shifting that other 'reality' of performed actions – elaborate processes of series of personal correspondences and finally meetings with the chosen prospective 'husband', followed by the organisation and execution of the most problematic and unstable performative-cum-legal acts of the wedding and emigration. By shifting the work to the highly risky and definitely non-artistic (but are they really?, the artist thus asks) media of marital and immigration laws, Ostojić crosses the most heavily regulated social boundary to a space where reality and fiction at least nominally very rarely mix.

What Ostojić's performative action then does, by inhabiting the highly provocative and potentially legally punitive role of the 'East-European bride' – a description behind which one will find everything from organised prostitution to marriages of convenience in order to obtain visas and residencies in the Western countries – is exactly to provocatively point to the nominality of any such clear division between law and fiction. Ostojić followed her artist-cum-EU-wanna-be-resident project through in careful detail and after receiving

⁴³ In the programme for Mons Veneris: Female Geographies exhibition organised at the Austrian Cultural Forum in London from 24 October–6 December 2002, cf. <http://www.acflondon.org/art/archive/mons_veneris/ostojic.html>.

apparently more than 500 responses to her advertisement entered into correspondence with several respondents, finally meeting and marrying German artist Klemens Golf in a civil ceremony in Belgrade and then emigrating to Germany. Their subsequent divorce and the Divorce Party marked the formal ending of the project but all of the project's paraphernalia have since continued their journey in form of an exhibition of the extensive documentation, including letters, Serbian marriage certificate, wedding photographs, and blown-up photocopies of Ostojić's passport pages showing her German visas.

The artificiality of Ostojić's gesture, the non-referential nature of her mimicry of a personal ad was followed through in every detail of the project, set up as a webpage with what looked like an ordinary personal ad but in all the details of its execution proved to be far from it: the webpage, in which the artist, as the title of her work states, was *Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport*, was hosted by various art institutions; the terribly lit and photographed snapshot of the artist, calling herself 'hot Tanja' on the page, showed the attractive young woman naked and severely lit against a white background, with a shaved head and sex and looking openly into the camera, a strange mixture of a concentration camp prisoner and an 'easy' female offering her self-as-body in exchange for status, more of an embodiment of multiple Western prejudices and fantasies of the East European subjects than the 'hot Tanja' promised in her text. Moreover, the photographer Boris Krajnc is credited on the page and the artist claims copyright for the image, thus further queering the status of the badly designed advertisement.⁴⁴

Through such an elaborate yet disjointed mimicry of the desires of those she wished to talk about and to whom she acted as a proxy – the third-world women wishing to immigrate into the European Union – the artist brought into the public domain the

⁴⁴ For a detailed analysis of the project see: Rune Gade, 'Making Real: Strategies of Performing Performativity in Tanja Ostojić's *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*', in Rune Gade & Anne Jerslev (eds), *Performative Realism: Interdisciplinary Studies in Art and Media*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005, pp. 181–208.

entire baggage of their questionable legal, ethical and gendered status, in which she was inextricably implicated. This conscious and total implication of the artist's personal position in the work brings an additional unusual angle to this project. The desire of her subjects in the project was one painfully and problematically shared by the artist, who wanted to leave Serbia but could not travel freely with a Serbian passport. Ostojić could be said to deal here with the relative novelty of finding herself unflatteringly marked as an abject other, a third-world woman eager but banned from moving freely on the European continent as a consequence of Serbia's role in the 1990s wars in former Yugoslavia. As for many other people of our generation, having travelled freely from a very young age and then having spent years in protests against Milosević's regime, this role has been one difficult to swallow. However, without being overly invested in her own position, Ostojić produced her work as a far more uncomfortable and provocative mix of the real and fictional, and of testing the boundaries of legality and freedom. The lack of any truly dire circumstances of her own that would somehow narrativise her leaving as a morally more easily acceptable act leaves all who engage with the work, unwittingly or as its 'proper' audiences, exactly in that Lacanian space of anxiety that brutally undermines any easy solutions that feelings of pity for her misfortune or fear for her freedom could have provided as affective keys into the work. The dating of her project, which began in the year 2000, a few months before Milosević was ousted after some 12 years in power in Serbia, again precludes any such easy resolutions of the affective tensions that her work provokes by touching on some of the most intimate and at the same time most generally accepted or imposed legal rules concerning marriage and freedom of movement. Ostojić's project continued for several years after the fall of Milosević's regime, during which time the artist did obtain a German leave to remain only to continue working across the European divide and speaking in the name of other marginalised groups and identities that are not given voice in the European

Union. As her work since has shown, Ostojić continues to use many of her strategies from the *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* piece in these more recent works, queering the domains of the real and the artificial, of legal and ethical boundaries of acceptable behaviour that leave the marginalised further debilitated, with the state tacitly disregarding the political background of their status and dehumanising their lives into statistics and sets of legal regulations barring them access to any legal and social protection.

The other project I wish to analyse in the context of this very different, proactive and provocative take on mimicry and the testimonial gesture is contemporaneous to Ostojić's project, the 2001–2003 work *Where We Come From* by Emily Jacir, an American artist of Palestinian origin who – like Ostojić – is now already an internationally recognised and award-winning artist. Jacir's *Where We Come From* is once again a complex conceptual work, both extremely intimate and private, and highly political. The project began with the artist's gesture of approaching a small number of the many exiled Palestinians who were for various reasons forbidden from entering the state of Israel where she was free to travel thanks to her US passport, with the following question: 'If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?' Jacir explains that there was nothing out of the ordinary in her gesture: 'I've spent my entire life going back and forth, connecting with people, family, and friends. Carrying things back and forth was natural, something that I was already doing anyway.'⁴⁵ What the project did was reiterate and re-mark her usual journeys while at the same time widening the scope of possible fulfilment of diasporic desires. Usually limited to highly practical considerations, these desires could now include anything, anywhere in that land where they all came from and could not return.

⁴⁵ Emily Jacir cited in the essay by Tom Vanderbilt in *Wherever I Am: Yael Bartana, Emily Jacir, Lee Miller*, exh. cat., Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2004, pp. 31–34 (32). Vanderbilt's essay was first published as 'Openings: Emily Jacir', *Artforum*, February 2004: 140–141.

The two projects have a number of interestingly converging concerns: if for Ostojić, the entire elaborate project of *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* focused on the key acts of performatively marking and then legally crossing the all-but-closed border between Serbia and the EU, the single and most important stable point in the many visits that together formed Jacir's project was the act of crossing the heavily policed checkpoints leading into the Palestinian territory. Once again, Jacir acted as a proxy, acted in another's stead, in another instance of mimicry that did not strive to achieve an adequation but rather remarked the sharp outlines of loss, not unsimilar to how, in another and admittedly very different context, Ostojić's brutally displayed body and dubious action/s only seemed to mimic the stereotype of an East European woman while in fact sculpting very sharply the outlines of Western prejudice and desire for, and the resilience of that East European other.

Even in their most differing aspects, Ostojić's project being an act of leaving while Jacir's project focused on a return, or rather on the never-ending series of returns followed by more departures, the two projects drew a not altogether different outline of what any state's external and internal borders really stand for, showing both the utter ordinariness of the many desires and lives these borders leave painfully out of reach, and the inhuman and often absurd nature of the laws that keep those same borders firmly in place.

The two projects also share a number of formal similarities, as both works take place most poignantly as performances but are relayed and become known through their documentation, mixing the medium of performance with other media, in Jacir's case with photography and with written text. The written aspect of *Where We Come From* included English and Arabic transcripts of the initial series of written communications that Jacir acted upon in her work, including highly detailed personal information of all the people whose wishes the artist fulfilled in Palestine, given with an administrative type

of exactness. The requests Jacir received covered the entire field of diasporic longings and losses, from asking the artist to go and see someone's mother, visit a grave of a loved one, visit family and bring pictures of children of close relatives to see how they have grown up, to instructions on how to get to a special place, or simply go for a walk, play football, eat someone's favourite dish, pay bills or water a tree. The artist performed her tasks, took a series of images documenting and visually marking the actions she performed, and finally formalised her journeys in a series consisting always of a printed text transcribing the individual requests, split on the page between the English and the Arabic versions, juxtaposed with a corresponding image the artist took on location. The series was initially distributed in printed form as the imperviousness of the Israeli checkpoints additionally meant that her audiences were not able to physically gather in one place in order to see the work, but it has since also been exhibited in a number of different contexts and finally acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Jacir's seemingly ordinary gesture, once it became formalised into an art project, produced a body of work that while remaining linked to the everydayness and the intimacy of its actions in its low-key execution and the aesthetic decisions relating to the work's subsequent display, poignantly re-marked and made visible the absurdities and painful separations, as well as 'the banality of exile'.⁴⁶ Jacir's low-key aesthetic added another significant aspect to the work, as it did not allow for the affective force of the work to be totally invested in the visual remainders of her performed actions. This is another common trait of Jacir's and Ostojić's projects that both work with a certain disinvestment of the visual field. In light of the theory of affect I have been outlining, this confusing of the locus of the work and the indeterminacy it creates makes any easy affective resolutions impossible. This is key for not losing the work to the lure of mimesis but instead using

⁴⁶ T. J. Demos, 'Desire in Diaspora: Emily Jacir', *Art Journal*, Winter 2003: 69–78 (70).

the 'empty' mimetic gesture to remark, in this case, on the painful absences of those who should have been living their very ordinary lives and performing these very ordinary gestures in these highly specific places but are now absent, so that in the work they can be portrayed, exactly in the sense portrait is traditionally thought of in the visual arts, except that here the subjects, absent from their desired background view, are given form by proxy, fleetingly and just for a few simple moments, captured on film by the artist. What the resulting image documents in each case is not a likeness of a face but a likeness of a situation.

Moreover, in documenting her own performance Jacir re-marks (on) another absence, that of the artist in the images, since she in most cases remained behind the lens or present in the resulting documentation at most as a shadow or a segment of a body. This doubling of absence visually emphasised the fact that the artist's agency in the project was complicated by her standing in someone else's place, in the place of another's desire, while also facing the impossibility to fulfil her own desire to somehow bring these scattered identities and narratives together, to heal the breach. As noted by T. J. Demos: 'there is little salve in Jacir's service, little benefit that can be gained from her proxy performance, little life or warmth in the photograph [...] a cold and unsatisfying substitute. But cruelly, it is the only one to be had.'⁴⁷ Some eight years on, sadly, the same cruel facts remain in place. But the act of giving time, giving shape and giving body to these impossible desires continues to resonate, and remarks on the possibility of change, or at least on the willingness and determination to keep that possibility open.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 72.

In Place of Conclusion: Which S/cr(i/y)pt?

If memories subsist through our bodies as much as through our conscious minds, what do extreme experiences teach us about how we dis/engage with what we have lost? If ‘present violence creates traumata, which “I” cannot access and “I” do not know’,⁴⁸ is it our bodies that lend themselves to this memory, and to this history, bodies marked by violence, but also bodies able to make their violent re-mark? And is it then through the attendance to these bodies that loss may be rendered present, and the limits of remembering challenged during a prolonged and precarious encounter with the ‘remains’ of trauma?

This cannot be an ordinary encounter, and it is certainly not a confrontation. It happens in time, and is in fact itself a movement into time from the ‘perpetually present (no-time) and absent (non-space) [phallic] dimension’ of trauma.⁴⁹ It is a movement and a presence, and it is strongly and inevitably embodied.

The notion of the encounter with the ‘remains’ of trauma is a challenge for thinking about how performance and its dramaturgy changes when observed from the perspective of trauma. Dramaturgy is here understood as ‘the text (the weave) of the performance’, where ‘the word text, before referring to a written or spoken, printed or manuscripted text, meant ‘a weaving together.’⁵⁰ Such a definition of dramaturgy becomes especially significant when this text / weave is marked by a traumatic occurrence, which by definition damages, tears down its integrating fabric. How can we address the difficulty, physically and philosophically, of accessing a destructive event through a creative act, the impossibility

⁴⁸ Griselda Pollock, from the plenary address at the trauma/art/representation symposium held in May 2006 at the ICIA, University of Bath.

⁴⁹ Griselda Pollock, ‘Art/Trauma/Representation’, *parallax*, 2009, vol. 15, no. 1: 40–54 (46).

⁵⁰ Eugenio Barba, in Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology. The Secret Art of the Performer*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 68. Barba’s rather conservative notion of dramaturgy as a weave has been politicised as an issue of feminine, invisible labour, especially pertinent for a certain contemporary approach to dramaturgy in André Lepecki and Cindy Brizzell, ‘Introduction: The Labor of the Question is the (Feminist) Question of Dramaturgy’, *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 2003, vol. 13, no. 26: 15–16.

of weaving a tear in the fabric (of text / performance)?⁵¹ This is what I am proposing in the thesis as ‘dramaturgies of loss,’ as a certain ‘melancholy’ or traumatic text that can be a creative answer to the forces of violence.

In their Introduction to the collection of essays *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, editors David L. Eng and David Kazanjian point to the notion of ‘melancholic excess – an abundance implicit in the very notion of remains – that exceeds the restrictive enclosure of melancholia as pathology, negativity, or negation.’⁵² The notion of loss functions in their collection as something of an overarching term, a ‘theoretical fiction’ standing for all that is ‘apprehended by discourses and practices of mourning, melancholia, nostalgia, sadness, trauma and depression.’⁵³ From this admittedly gloomy list, it is melancholia – and not mourning which Freud sees as a non-pathological process in dealing with the lost object – that the authors engage as the key term for a certain politics of non-closure, arguing that rather than melancholia, it is ‘historicism’s fixing of the remains of the past [that] is hopeless.’⁵⁴ In a theoretical u-turn that refuses either a positivist or a medical closure of such excessive engagement with the past, Eng and Kazanjian suggest melancholia as not only a “grasping” or “holding” on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains,⁵⁵ a relation that is creative, unpredictable, and that has strong political potential.

It is the sense of non-closure that links all my examples in this chapter and points to the possibility of a very particular kind of dramaturgical openness. Either actively sought, or endured, that non-closure is what creates the affective mismatch of these works’

⁵¹ I am grateful to Dr Judith Ashton for the discussion on the weave / tear of trauma.

⁵² David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss*, p. 5.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 2. The notion of ‘theoretical fiction’ is borrowed from Freud, cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, New York: Avon Books, 1965, p. 643.

⁵⁴ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss*, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

mimetic actions and shows mimesis to be neither an adequation nor a representation but a certain resistance to closure of meaning and of the past, which thus also becomes open to future possibilities. This sense of an open futurity is another significant reason 'why we have to talk to [the ghost] graciously, why we have to learn how it speaks,'⁵⁶ as Avery Gordon writes in her *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*:

The ghost always registers the actual "degraded present" [...] in which we are inextricably and historically entangled and the longing for the arrival of a future, entangled certainly, but ripe in the plenitude of nonsacrificial freedoms and exuberant unforeseen pleasures. The ghost registers and it incites.⁵⁷

The political potential of melancholia rests with the uncanny yet vital importance of this ghost in which, as Gordon writes, deep wounds, but also some parts of us 'in abeyance of the injury and some part of the missing better life [...] are in haunting evidence.'⁵⁸ Such a ghost should not be confused with a mythical revival of a past, for unlike myth it is hauntingly non-redemptive. Instead, it is what just may grant us a non-sacrificial future. It is what disturbs us, but in that disturbance does not allow the past to become enclosed, to become redeemed in narrative and representation. However, the fact that it 'incites' shows that this process has strong potential for the 'reversibility of performative force' that McKenzie theorises in relation to violence,⁵⁹ so that its 'happy ending' is not in any way guaranteed. A victorious reckoning with the ghost, Gordon warns, 'requires a partiality to the living. Because ultimately haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of a peaceful reconciliation.'⁶⁰ It is in 'partiality to the living' and to an undiminished creativity that a cultural politics of

⁵⁶ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 207.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Cf. Chapter Two, p. 61.

⁶⁰ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 208.

melancholia tends to what remains after loss ('as soon as the question "What is lost?" is posed, it invariably slips into the question "What remains?"'⁶¹). The problems involved in the process of such tending may not be too different from the problem of peace itself in that it does not seem to hold up much to view, that its strength rests in a sense of duration, of a continual process of at-tendance to life.

The failure 'at the heart of mimesis'⁶² that this chapter has been outlining follows a particular line of feminist performance theory, articulated most notably by Elin Diamond, who in her *Undoing Mimesis* has argued that by overwriting the lure of the sign-referent gap of classical mimesis by an intervention of Benjaminian mimesis, of the dialectical image that unhinges the mimetic relationship and thus interrupts the (capitalist) idea of progress and continuity of development, feminist performance unlocks the 'particular temporality, a space of 'now-time' with no comforting historical narratives to limit meanings'.⁶³ However, this 'ontology of presence', especially as it has been articulated in its key theorisation in performance studies already in 1993 by Phelan in her *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, is easily mistaken for a simple displacement of the mimetic investment in adequation and continuity by a certain nostalgia for the 'fullness' of the present moment and of liveness and 'the body' which suddenly seems to have freed itself from interpretation. But the complexity of this ontology, as I have already argued in Chapter One,⁶⁴ is in its inevitable incalculable reminder, whether we are to define it as Lacan's *object (a)* or as Badiou's event, or as what Phelan describes as the 'suspension between the "real" physical matter of "the performing body" and the psychic experience of

⁶¹ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss*, p. 2.

⁶² Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 180.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ See Chapter One, p. 21.

what it is to be embodied'.⁶⁵ It is the ghost of this reminder that I have attempted to trace through my arguments here. Performance can be such tool that keeps the ghostly space of that suspension open, while acknowledging that it will always already be overtaken by the event, just as the event will always leave our acts "speechless", to echo Franko's words again.

The resistance to closure of history can also be productively analysed through the theoretical tool of trauma studies, where such historicist closure may be compared to the lure of catharsis in healing trauma (or in performance). According to the psychiatrist and trauma theorist Judith Lewis Herman, the lure of catharsis has for a long time rested in 'the fantasy of a violent cathartic cure which will get rid of the trauma once and for all [...] fuelled by images of early, cathartic treatments of traumatic syndromes which by now pervade popular culture, as well as by the much older religious metaphor of exorcism'.⁶⁶ What Lewis Herman suggests as an alternative image is to view recovery as running a marathon: 'Survivors immediately grasp the complexities of this image. They recognize that recovery, like a marathon, is a test of endurance, requiring long preparation and repetitive practice'.⁶⁷ Despite strong historical links of catharsis to performance, and the apparently shocking visceral confrontation of much of contemporary live art and performance, I suggest that performance likewise positions itself as 'a marathon' and 'a test of endurance' in relation to trauma and that this shift of emphasis again calls for a changed theoretical vocabulary that includes a questioning of the cathartic lure of fear and pity and allows for the admittedly strange inclusion of anxiety into its affective register. It is also a vocabulary that, with Diamond, argues mimetic failure as the deepest pleasure and a highly productive gap in performance, while also attending to the specificities of the changed engagement with mimesis in performance when seen through the lens of trauma.

⁶⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 167.

⁶⁶ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, New York: Basic Books, 1997 (1992), p. 172.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

A significant facet of this new vocabulary is the theorising of the nature of that ‘perpetually present (no-time) and absent (no-space) dimension’ that Pollock discusses in the context of the traumatic dimension of any engagement with the loss of redemptive history. In her Afterword to the collection on *Loss*, and drawing on Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Judith Butler notes how, according to Benjamin, ‘a certain problem of loss emerges when established narratives begin to falter, suggesting that narrative functioned once as a way of containing loss.’⁶⁸ Benjamin locates this faltering of the established narratives to the time of the baroque, whose expansive, elaborate style he sees as the material expression of that loss, in which the ‘originally temporal data [*became transposed*] into a figurative spatial simultaneity’.⁶⁹ In Benjamin’s analysis, the catastrophe of eschatological loss had led to the dissolution of sequential temporality and an introduction of a certain choreographic, spatial answer to the temporality of the action-based tragedy.⁷⁰ Like Bakhtin’s architectonics, this new choreography configures the subject as interacting with-in a complex space, an old-new space where, as Butler writes: ‘[t]his loss is bringing bodies to the foreground’.⁷¹ Butler stresses that such non-eschatological spatial thinking does not suggest a paralysis of motion. It is not a stasis but is, once again, as with Derrida’s mime, a mimicry that represents nothing, ‘the gesture, the one that has, as it were, lost its referent, the one that operates through a non-mimetic semiotic of its own’.⁷² What the notion of loss introduces to all these spaces is a shift in the understanding of time, a different sense of time that substitutes the abandoned sequential temporality.

⁶⁸ Judith Butler, Afterword, in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss*, p. 469.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Benjamin refers here specifically to the dramatic form of the *Trauerspiel*, the German Baroque Mourning Play.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 470.

⁷² Ibid.

Bakhtin resolves the temporal dimension of the subject in the world through the idea of the map of our being in the world, what he conceives of as a kind of a book of subject's relations with the world, a pattern created by dialogue that evolves in time. Butler also introduces loss as a highly particular sense of time, a present that only exists in as much as it includes the trace of loss that has already indelibly marked its 'newness' and constitutes it as its integral part. This notion of loss as a productive agent, Butler argues, is neither a rewriting of the past nor its redemption 'that would successfully reconstitute its meaning from and as the present.'⁷³ It is, paradoxically, a certain kind of productivity; no longer a narrative, redemptive kind of production of meaning but what Butler sees, after Benjamin, as a kind of *wreckage*. In performance, such spatial and temporal shift includes works that actively engage and play with the temporal paradox of presentness in performance, not as an ideal present but as a perseverance in a difficult gap where '[p]erformance boldly and precariously declares that Being is performed (and made temporarily visible) in that suspended in-between.'⁷⁴

Performance has always generated sites for a 'ghost' of Being to appear; however, this particular rehearsal of a ghost performance that I have been engaging with in this chapter is predicated on an embodied culture, a culture where regardless of all the additional layers of recorded memory, inside-and-out-of bodies 'the past and the present [still] mingle with each other; they exist in cohabitation because there is no library, no archive, no museum, where the past could be safely stored. The body plays all these roles, juggling new events without dropping any from the past, because dropping one would mean losing it forever.'⁷⁵ Bodies are fast losing such archival importance for our culture/s;

⁷³ Ibid., p. 468.

⁷⁴ Peggy Phelan, 'Afterword: notes on hope – for my students', *Unmarked*, p. 167.

⁷⁵ Jennifer Allen, "'Einmal ist keinmal': Observations on Reenactment' in Sven Lütticken (ed.), *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art 2005, p. 191. Allen is describing the characteristics of oral cultures.

in fact, amidst the increasingly sophisticated systems of digital storage, and of our new libraries, museums and archives, bodies' saturation with memory that conditions and potentially debilitates them is part of the reason for the Australian artist Stelarc's most radical challenge, claiming that our bodies are already 'obsolete' and arguing how working with memory and with desire, with an embodied past should be 'dropped' in art. Instead, Stelarc proposes that

we are unfolding behaviors that are not dependent on those old metaphysical and gender and genetically conditioned actions. We are producing something that does not have to depend on memory, is not driven by desire. But in that neutrality, within this new space which is neither body nor machine, within this alternate operational space what can be discovered, what can be exposed, what can be experienced? Is it possible to have a personal relationship with someone without being immersed in nostalgia, not driven by desire and expectation, not performing with emotion?⁷⁶

Although I do not share Stelarc's wholesale departure from some of the finest facets of humanity, contemplating the possibility of producing a space not dependent on memory and not driven by desire in the context of this chapter on loss is not as incongruous as it may seem. I will discuss the notion of sense memory in detail in the next chapter but what I feel may link the political potential of a creative engagement with loss to contemplating such an alternate operational space is that both are interested in a certain notion of remains, of what remains after loss, where for Stelarc it would seem that it is memory- or desire-driven behaviours that may be lost, that are left behind.

What the notion of remains brings to Stelarc's part-human-part-technological space/s, to the technologically-augmented, interfaced, interactive operative space/s, however, questions the neutrality of any such space, as it would suggest that such a space will also inevitably invite its own ghosts, that it will be an affected space, although a space where affect, as Brennan would argue, refers to 'a physiological shift accompanying a

⁷⁶ Stelarc interviewed by Miss M. Online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.t0.or.at/stelarc/interview01.htm>>.

judgment [and not] surges of emotion or passion.’⁷⁷ An affective space where instead of a desire-as-projection-cum-representation and memory-as-narrative, desire may be seen as *jouissance*, as an unbound affectivity, as Ettinger’s trans-subjective connecting affective ‘strings’ or ‘threads’. An affected space where memory would embrace its phantom, not as a figment of imagination but, as Stelarc would probably prefer, more like learning to live with a phantom limb sensation.⁷⁸ What we cannot avoid, though, in this now operational space, is something intrinsic to the traumatic nature of this unavoidable ‘psychic phantom,’⁷⁹ of the lost object in psychoanalytical terms, impossible to introject as would be the case in the processes of mourning where the subject comes to ‘own’ its desires and forms its subjectivity by leaving the lost (maternal) object of its past behind. The difference between introjection and incorporation, where the former is proper to the processes of mourning and the latter is characteristic of melancholy, has been theorised by the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who describe incorporation through the notion of the crypt, entirely sealed off from consciousness, not subconscious but utterly alien, the ‘*rejected psychic matter of a paternal object*’.⁸⁰

The fact that the crypt of history is not our own, that it has been passed on to us from a past we have never known but in which we remain implicated through this inaccessible but utterly intimate, incorporated crypt, makes both the project of our self-formation and the movements by which we would dis/engage with that unscripted but

⁷⁷ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, p. 5.

⁷⁸ See interview with Stelarc in note 76 in this chapter. For detailed theorising of the phantom limb, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington; and Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994.

⁷⁹ Nicolas Abraham (1974-1975). Notes du séminaire sur l’unité duelle et le fantôme, and (1975), Notules sur le fantôme, both in *L’Ecorce et le Noyau*. Paris: Flammarion, 1987, cited in Maria Yassa, ‘Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok – The inner crypt’, *Scandinavian Psychoanalytical Review*, 2002, vol. 25, no. 2.

⁸⁰ Maria Torok, ‘Story of Fear: The Symptoms of Phobia – The Return of the Repressed or the Return of the Phantom?’ in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, transl. and ed. Nicolas T. Rand, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 177–186 (181), emphasis in original.

traumatic, 'perpetually present (no-time) and absent (no-space)' cryptic history already extremely difficult. But that difficulty could just as well be seen a form of dance, and a time and space far more complex and intriguing than any hope of newly created, un-baggaed virgin space may offer us. In fact, we could argue with Badiou, that any such project would anyway always have an un-baggaed virgin space as its proper potentiality, its un-nameable, un-forcible point that fixes the potency of any truth and thus keeps it from turning into its own destruction.

Whereas the traditional notion of mimesis may be seen as an affirmation of our sense of ownership of our desires through a perpetual exercise of repetition and adequation, of the drive for the omnipotence of truth, Benjaminian mimesis is an acknowledgment of the surplus that repetition and adequation cannot account for. This chapter has traced some of the interpretations of what that surplus may involve and what its significant political and creative potentials may be, how it can be seen both as a space of 'ghosting', which I traced in my examples of failed performances of adequation of a catastrophe at the beginning of this chapter, and as an excess force which expands that 'ghost' space into a scattering of documents and other visual and textual remains that continue to circulate long after performances have taken place. I engaged with my four examples of performance strategies in this chapter above all for their deep involvement with the problematic of exile, and for the fact that in all of them mimesis somehow comes to play a highly significant and somewhat unexpected, either involuntarily or purposefully unhinged, part. In the first example, the young actress's inconspicuous mimetic exercise intuitively opened up a possibility to show how in mimesis '[t]he body is never fully subsumed in impersonation',⁸¹ but in a highly counter-intuitive way, by showing us how loss acts as the point where that body becomes almost entirely swallowed by impersonation, leaving both the sign

⁸¹ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 180.

and its referent emptied of all easily discernible content. In the second example, in their failed integration into the Western performance culture, and their equally failed attempt at preservation of their traditional form, the family of classical Khmer dancers involuntarily performed the 'ghostly form' of the dance of their exile. Being all but indiscernible, etched onto the strong lines of their traditional dance almost without reminder, so that it lost itself in that other mimesis, this ghostly form remained too alien for them to acknowledge it and allow it to openly enter their work, and yet it remained, through Hamera's writing and through their no doubt continued engagement with their memory and their art after the meeting Hamera writes about had already taken place.

The other two examples are far more current, both in that they happened a whole decade later, and that they are accomplished, completed works in which the artists are fully in control of their subject and their use of mimesis in their respective projects. They are also far more complex works whose meanings are carefully engineered through multiple layers and a variety of different media of which performance is but one and at least apparently not the central medium, and where encounters happen not in one of the hiatuses of exile, but across the borders and boundaries that allow for such hiatuses to exist in the first place. And yet in these two works as well the artists once again 'lent' their bodies to their work, and made this gesture key for understanding their projects. It was only by taking on the full personal and legal implication of her performed action (but leaving to herself the grace of the privacy of her personal life), that Ostojic's project rose above a brazen provocation or simple personal gain, without removing itself entirely from either, so that both propositions could remain problematically present in the work. Similarly, only by fully taking on the others' requests, by placing herself without expectations but also without remainder in the empty place of her interlocutor's desires, by allowing herself the luxury of fulfilling their wishes only to then see her action rendered speechless by the

enormity of the event of exile which made any such fulfilment impossible for the only people for whom it would in fact have mattered, did Jacir's project really allow for the powerful affect of those stories to disperse and for all the subsequent reverberations of the project to take shape in all the other media, including its documentation that continued to complicate and spread the dialogue opened by those first conversations that initiated the project.

In all these examples, the locus of that surplus of meaning which placed these performances precariously at the limits of what their respective forms were meant to convey (Charlie Chaplin; characters from Cambodian classical dance; East European 'bride'; mother/cousin/flat owner – or simply Hana/Osama/Rizek and all the other singular names of people to whom Jacir acted as proxy) was exactly the point at which their mimesis became a productive creative and political strategy. In each of the examples, it was that same surplus of meaning that did not allow these performances or projects to become didactic or resolved, or rather it was what allowed their resolutions to become a loosening, a relaxing of their charged themes and not a fixing of meaning to be interpreted and fully known. What was difficult in all cases, although seemingly more so in the two cases where mimesis was so closely placed upon and invested in the body as the (only) signifier, was to be somehow in control of the affective workings of their respective performances. The risks were in fact even greater in the case of Ostojić and Jacir, where this affective instability could easily have led to legal charges for the former, and hurting the intimate feelings of people who were in fact total strangers for the latter. This is not to say that to be in control of that affective instability, of the anxiety inherent to these works, would have meant a firmer fixing of their form; on the contrary, as all of the works were formally executed with great precision, their full engagement with this unstable affectivity did not involve an act of completion but an act of trust and of letting go, of remaining

in that space of mimesis while letting go of it, either consciously or involuntarily. That is what for me makes them occasions, themes or works that continue to engage, and also what makes them highly specific ethical occasions. Their affective and mimetic instability makes them occasions of an ethics that, as Badiou warns, 'is difficult to hold [because to accept it means] to accept that (mathematical) truth is never complete.'⁸² The other difficult truth of these performances is of course their shared subject of exile, which marked all of their protagonists profoundly as artists and people, and necessitated some form of reckoning, but that reckoning is once again one that is never complete and generates again the potential of the surplus affect.

⁸² Badiou, 'On The Truth Process'.

Chapter Four

Trauma and Community: Scars and Rage

‘Standard Drab’

The soldiers approach the house from the corn field: the whole extended family is gathered together in her grandmother’s garden, her father resting in a deckchair and she playing next to him. Or so her story goes, but she was less than five years old at this time and something fails me as I begin imagining the seven, or was it nine, brothers, or cousins, and wives and children and the grandmother. Did they gather the others elsewhere in the village and then come for the brothers? The brothers just happen to be visiting, having arrived from the city to help with the harvesting, their wives and children sitting in their mother’s garden. It is the beginning of a war but they are used to wars here. She has never tired of telling us how her grandmother never stopped wearing black garments for there was always someone dying in the family.

I like her looks. In her only remaining photograph from my grandparents’ wedding she is already so wrinkled it is impossible to tell her age but then she never looked any different apparently, for as long as they can remember. But they only came later and no one else is really left to tell, so the numbers and faces multiply and confuse me and I decide to give up on the entire event.

A foreign-looking young brunette is walking in the streets of a Central European city with her mother and the two women board a tram on the pretty side of the river and stay on it for three or four stops and the mother is quiet but as they get off she is a little shaken as she tells her daughter that she feels her own father’s presence for the first time since she was a very small child.

It began at an exact moment during the ride, the daughter is unsure when, or whether the mother is immediately aware of what is going on, and it ends at a very particular point as the two women walk onto a bridge to continue sightseeing. The mother is a highly rational woman and nothing has prepared her for this but they never talk about it much. It is left to the daughter to resolve what has happened as she becomes increasingly aware of her own feet tracing her grandfather's journeys through this city where he once lived, and where she once arrived as a well-travelled person and confident about her place in this seemingly placid universe despite the extraordinary circumstances of her journey.

When the shots are heard the little girl is probably in her mother's arms and, in the southern landscape stilled in the July heat, the sound of the shooting must be terrifying, but she then grows up never talking about it and when the bomber planes arrive six decades later and it all comes back to her she is determined not to join in with the others in allowing the time to move backwards. Instead, she stubbornly continues with her routine, the only change perhaps consisting in the set of exercises that will keep her very youthful looking in the years to come.

After the soldiers march off having left the men to die he apparently rises and staggers back to the house. She has never seen anybody bleed before, I am pretty certain of it, yet she will never evoke this particular image in her calm recounting of the event over the years except to say that what made the soldiers return was the sound of him gasping with pain, whereby some soldiers came running back and he was shot again.

This will be one of those evenings that I will often recall vividly although all that happens is that I am woken up into darkness after a late afternoon nap by my sister who has been listening to the news. I will soon learn that the walls of our student flat, which I could never quite get used to anyway, have definitely turned into a prison as tanks are sent into the streets and most people seem to disappear behind their curtains overwhelmed with painful memories, with fear or a rotten conscience.

I am sitting at an important gathering abroad and the people seem to be quite taken by something I say in my vaguely Slavic-sounding voice about there never existing a long-enough stretch of peace where I come from for there to be a second generation of survivors and this suddenly makes us quite distant. Then I wish I had never said it: I was just beginning to feel we were onto something, together.¹

Strange Attractors

The above text was composed in the context of a rigorously timed day of writing for one in a long series of relayed performances by the Australian artist Barbara Campbell which formed her *1001 nights cast* project.² In Campbell's own words, the *1001 nights cast* concept was 'generated by the forces of [the Arabian tales of] The 1001 nights: the theatrics of the voiced story, the need for framing devices, the strategies for survival, [and] the allure of the Middle East and its contrasting realities'.³ It was an internet-based durational performance work, which brought together the current political situation in the Middle East with stories written daily by participating writers and read by Campbell, broadcast live over the Internet over an unbroken succession of one-thousand-and-one nights between 21st June 2005 and 17th March 2008.

The project was framed and sustained over its extremely long duration through a series of structural devices, a series of strictly timed daily tasks the artist set for herself, and for the writer she would be collaborating with on each particular day. It would begin in the morning with Campbell reading journalists' reports covering the events in the

¹ Re-worked segments from a story written on 18 June 2007 for *1001 nights cast*, night 728, 'Standard Drab', performed at 9:57 PM, 18 June 2007, from Paris. Online access at <<http://1001.net.au/cgi-bin/isengine?o=1001&action=display&id=2012>>.

² *1001 nights cast* was a durational performance by Barbara Campbell, who performed a short text-based work, relayed at sunset at her location as a live webcast at <<http://1001.net.au>>, for 1001 consecutive nights between 2005 and 2008.

³ Project statement, online access, available HTTP: <<http://1001.net.au/about/>>.

Middle East in all of the morning papers available to her in her given location, selecting a phrase 'that leaps from the page with generative potential' from one of the texts and then rendering that phrase in watercolour. She would then post the scanned image of the watercolour to the project's website, as well as sending it, together with the link to the article, to the participating writer to use as a prompt. The writer was free to draw (or not) from the given newspaper article to contribute a story of a maximum of 1001 words to be performed in the evening at sunset in any location where the artist found herself at that particular moment in time.

The artist inaugurated the project into the anonymous virtual space of the Internet with a testimonial gesture. The opening page to Campbell's project states:

*In a faraway land a gentle man dies. His bride is bereft. She travels across continents looking for a reason to keep living. Every night at sunset she is greeted by a stranger who gives her a story to heal her heart and continue with her journey. She does so for 1001 nights.*⁴

How does a story heal a bereft heart? How does storytelling set out to accomplish such a task? There are no ready answers to this question but for me, in this first story I contributed to the project, the task stirred above all a need for a reciprocated gesture of a testimony. The narrative of that testimonial response, with which I have introduced this chapter, was a tentative attempt to relate an event from my family's history, a never accounted for murder of my maternal grandfather and other male members of his family by Italian Fascist troops at the beginning of the Second World War in Montenegro, and its reverberations across the next two generations of our family. Whereas the extreme trauma of this particular history inevitably escapes the scope of such a shorthand tale, noting it down in this manner reflected my own sense of exposure before the enormity of the artist's stated loss to which I felt compelled to respond, but also an awareness that the

⁴Intro page for the *1001 nights cast* project, online access, available HTTP: <<http://1001.net.au/index.shtml>>.

rigorous placing of Campbell's testimonial address within the taxing formal rules of her artistic project protected me in that response from taking on board the enormity of any *fact* of trauma; the project's collaborative leap of trust worked through a different gesture altogether, not through an investment in the arguably impossible task of understanding the events of loss and trauma, but through the artist's willingness to step, however blindly, into that overwhelming space and invite the others to follow, so that together we could begin to weave a thread of that story to heal the heart.

The noting of this story for me also echoed the ordinary status granted to the event of my mother's devastating loss in our family, where it used to be narrated, accompanied by the few surviving photographs of my grandparents, both of whom died in that war, as just one among many similar histories, in our family and in the experiences of almost everyone else in the country, so that the sense of a tacit communal sharing of trauma seemed to prevail over any individual tragedy. The tragic collision of this assumption of a 'community of memory' with the reality of violence of the 1990s brought to the fore the skewed nature of this narrative normalising of trauma. The warring projects of recreating national entities from what was both an ideologically levelled political space and a complex federation of many nations, ethnic groups and religions, achieved an all but total demise of the existing communities so that any sharing and transformation of traumatic affects was very consciously sealed off and confined to the newly reinforced frameworks of national identities. The memories and traumatic histories that emerged from so many past losses suddenly showed themselves as much too often deeply antagonistic. The question of the adequacy of narrative memory in rendering loss thus shows itself as not only a personal or an artistic one. Coming to terms with its painful discrepancy becomes especially urgent yet precluded in the face of the real and immediate danger of violence, where it operates as

a political question, and where numerous unresolved or politically suppressed traumatic histories prove most susceptible to being heavily exploited by extremist politics.

It is this particular susceptibility of the testimonial address to be overtaken by fiction, a susceptibility that can be both creatively engaged and viciously exploited, as well as the assumption of the commonality of memory that both my writing and Campbell's project engaged with, and that I will analyse in this chapter. The widening gap between symbols and realities of broken societies call for different strategies for art to engage in the aftermath of trauma, when loss of symbolic links complicates any form of artistic intervention into the unmoored and volatile affectivity of societies which are no longer definable even as occupying a common space, where affectively no such however complexly shared space can be said to exist.

Although following a very different trajectory of personal loss, Campbell's project proposes something about the possibilities of an artistic intervention into such affectively unmoored symbolic space. Through its extreme duration and its leap of trust in the anonymous others to provide means for survival, the project performed a day by day process of making a community through the recovery of the old-fashioned gift of sharing stories, of its gradual shaping through layer upon layer of fiction built on the firm base of measured time and around the menacing thread of reported fact. To say that the Internet provides an unprecedented possibility for alternative social and political networks, especially in societies where power relies heavily on curbing alternative symbolic links that could spur dissent is commonplace enough and increasingly obvious. But to animate that space through such an old technique of storytelling shows what the symbolic stakes are in the building of a community, and how its continued existence is recreated daily through making sense with and for the other/s.

Campbell's project was not a simple proliferation of testimony. Instead, it created a shared space for a proliferation of a kind of lived fiction, a stream of instant episodes of storytelling; it had a complexity of a weave, merging together fact and fiction through a laborious, continual insistence on the reported fact of the daily press articles, and its parallel undoing by the thread of fiction. The performative force of the artist's testimonial leap ('she does so for 1001 nights' goes the artist's inaugural performative utterance) in retrospect shows how the project generated its own sustenance through a continual performance of remaining with a precarious puncture in the present moment, through the daily grind of working through the maze of press material, pulverising it and extracting from it but a single poetic impulse which was then sent across virtual space to be taken up by the writers.

With its unrelenting demand on the artist and on the kind stranger, the project's performative force was maybe most palpably measured by the growing community of writers it produced, for what began as a handful of collaborating writers by the end of the project included several hundred contributors from many parts of the world and not all of us with English as our first language. The project's link to the Middle East at the time of the Western invasion of Iraq may be seen as problematic, implying an uncomfortable mix of a romanticising investment in the allure of the Arabian tales and a guilt-ridden attempt of a Western subject to do something in the situation of a war being waged in its name in a foreign country, the only links with which one is able to make consisting of an incessant stream of journalistic report and an awareness and intimacy with the wealth of its artistic and literary heritage. And yet I believe that the thread of the Middle East in the project fulfilled a very different purpose and marked a different kind of investment. Campbell's project was a highly particular engagement with the remnants of trauma, an entirely scheduled, scripted by others, prolonged, anticipated and hoped for movement

into time from the 'perpetually present (no-time) and absent (no-space) dimension'⁵ of the trauma of her profound personal loss. Parallel to this process, another major traumatic humanitarian catastrophe was happening on a daily basis in Iraq, and was allowed to merge with the artist's personal story with no 'real' connections, as it did for the majority of writers or virtual audiences of the project with no direct links with Iraq, in a way traumatic remnants seem to act as strange attractors in that perpetual double presence and absence of the traumatic no-dimension of time.

Strange attractors are a curious phenomenon of modern science, a point at which numeric information can be rendered as a non-linear dynamic image:

The strange attractor lives in the phase space, one of the most powerful inventions of modern science. Phase space gives a way of turning numbers into pictures, abstracting every bit of essential information from a system of moving parts, mechanical or fluid, and making a flexible road map to all its possibilities [...].⁶

A dispersed centre of Campbell's performance text / weave, both transparent and collapsing into a point at each temporal moment of her 1001 nights long durational performance, turned the mass of journalistic fact into a single image on each of the 1001 days of the project, a simple watercoloured phrase that became a dynamic imaginary frame, a poetic, personal remnant of all that went on in that overwhelming production of newsworthy language at any given instant of time and from which fact could be transformed into a shared fiction.

My placing of the complex structure of Campbell's performance alongside the notion of the phase space may serve to activate in language the beautiful complexity of a non-linear dynamic weave of Campbell's unstable performance text, which can possibly also be described as 'a system of moving parts, mechanical or fluid', involving a complex motion of the regular processing of news production together with the singular writerly

⁵ Griselda Pollock, 'Art/Trauma/Representation', p. 46.

⁶ James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science*, London: Abacus, 1993, p.134.

and performative engagements with the resulting dynamic frame of the phrase / image. The implication of an inevitable amount of blind guessing, of chance that any individual frame attracted into the project defined the 'flexible map of all [the project's] possibilities' at any given moment. In this way the project became an incessant notation, a notation that was then just a way of mapping a route as the artist and her distant collaborators were taking it, notation that remains fully incorporated in the very fibre of the duration of Campbell's performance, whether we describe it as the resulting archive still available online, or in more complex terms. Whichever way we choose to define the materiality of Campbell's performance text, the principle of its organisation does not automatically assign value to any of its specific elements, including the charged subject of the conflict in the Middle East, outside the complexity of their shared pattern over time. As a result of this, each fictive and/or redemptive gift is thus cast as a fragmentary and therefore dependent upon a wider communal, durational action, i.e. forces in excess of any singular narrative unity and closure.

I have included both my writing and this analysis of Barbara Campbell's project to complicate from the start the questions of artists' work with community and with traumatic memory, which I wish to raise in this and the following chapter. In this chapter I will focus especially on the nature of 'traumatic' memory and its links to representation and re-narrativisation of traumatic events. Views about the truth potential and the healing potential of re-narrativising traumatic experience differ greatly among the professionals working with trauma survivors, as well as among theorists and artists working with/ in traumatised communities, or engaging with others' or their own autobiographical material which may be considered traumatic in the strict sense. The issues of the so-called transgenerational transmission of trauma explored in the narrative with which I have opened this chapter are even more strongly contested, however, the phenomenon

has been documented and argued with persuasion by a diverse community of scholars and practitioners, especially psychoanalysts studying the impact of Shoah, who note the remarkable way in which trauma is transmitted to the children and even the third generation of the families of survivors.

Yolanda Gampel, an Israeli psychiatrist and psychoanalyst with extensive experience of working with trauma survivors, has introduced the term 'radioactive identification' to emphasise the difficulty of warding off the consequences of extremely destructive events and to describe the force with which 'external reality enters the psychic apparatus without the individual having any control over its entry, implantation or effects'.⁷ One major consequence of this force is identification, for the remnants of destructive events are no longer easily distinguished from how an individual defines herself. The notion of radioactivity also points to the temporal aspect of trauma, to the continuing damage traumatic experiences produce, a damage that is constitutional and not easily detected or communicated, revealing itself not through language but, as Gampel and many others in the field of trauma studies describe, 'through images, nightmares and symptoms',⁸ and yet as Campbell's project suggests, capable of being reconnected into language through a stream of fiction that we share with one another.

'Remembering to forget [...] may be [...] a higher and more austere task than that of never omitting to remember,' critic and writer Steven Connor warns in his paper on *Overlooking*:⁹

⁷ Yolanda Gampel, 'Reflections on the prevalence of the uncanny in social violence', in Antonius C. G. M. Robben, Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco (eds), *Cultures Under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 48–69 (59).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Steven Connor, 'On Overlooking', paper given at *Witness: Memory, Representation and the Media in Question*, European Summer School in Cultural Studies, Copenhagen, 25 August 2004; published in Ulrik Ekman and Frederik Tygstrup (eds), *Witness: Memory, Representation, and the Media in Question*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008, pp. 291–302. Online access. Available HTTP: <<http://www.stevenconnor.com/overlooking/>>.

The only one [sic] to bear witness is to continue to live, which is inevitably to start to forget, to revise, to overlook, to leave behind the singularity of the event. [...] The discomforts about witness and testimony are certainly at bottom discomforts about time and forgetting.¹⁰

I came across Connor's paper 'On Overlooking' very early on in the course of this research, when I still felt compelled to revisit a highly particular time and place at the onset of wars in former Yugoslavia. I was driven by what is still a profound sense of powerlessness and incomprehension about the place artists, and especially theatre makers, were prepared to occupy in the country that was bracing itself for a highly treacherous war. However, as the research has progressed, I have had to question myself again and again about the nature of that impulse for an impossible sort of return. More interestingly, in time these questions became less attached to the specific singular events and more focused on the nature of these *affects* that unresolved past leaves as its imprint in memory, on where they are lodged in the body and in the textures of the social spaces, for how long, how is it that they resurface and why is it that they are so difficult to pin down and recognise, let alone do something about.

In his book *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay theorises the notion of the 'thémis', of 'what is right', originating with Homer's writing and denoting normative expectations, the accepted moral principle that is betrayed in war:

Betrayal of thémis in life-or-death circumstances has profoundly damaging consequences for the biological makeup of the victim. Restoration of trustworthy community to the survivor will have healthy biological effects, of comparable or greater magnitude than successful medications.¹¹

Shay is a doctor and a clinical psychiatrist and his language mirrors his professional concerns and his passion for linking modern experience of war with classical testimonies exemplified in the writing of Homer, but what has stayed with me from his writing are the links he makes – ones that are far from obvious – between our ethical norms and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, New York: Atheneum, 1994, p. 186.

our biological makeup. What I have been tracing in the thesis is ways to look not to Homer's epics but to particular modes of contemporary art and performance making for the possibilities of 'repair' of a trustworthy community, of ways to work with fragmented narrative that may provide links between these apparently highly disparate spheres of ethics and biology. I will indicate the ways artists are increasingly attempting to approach our biological makeup through understanding the complex relations of our living bodies to such betrayals of ethics. I will also ask how – and if at all – such propositions about a restoration of a trustworthy community can be tackled as a possibility in performance contexts without precluding the problematic aspects of both any hope for restoration and any easy definition of a community.

Memory is often seen in contemporary social and cultural theory as the key performative site for taking, if not a biological than a certain biographical turn in promoting social justice, and in recreating the shattered sense/s of community in trauma survivors, as asserted in the following quote by the film theorist Annette Kuhn:

In acknowledging the performative nature of remembering, memory work takes on board productivity and encourages the practitioner to use the pretexts of memory, the traces of the past that remain in the present, as raw material in the production of new stories about the past. These stories may heal the wounds of the past. They may also transform the ways individuals and communities live in and relate to the present and the future [...] how we use these relics to make memories, and how we then make use of the stories they generate to give deeper meanings to, and if necessary to change, our lives now.¹²

Although this proposition echoes many really powerful and positive elements from Campbell's project, what I feel is missing from such deliberation on the free hand given to the creative practitioner in the present to re-juggle the remnants of a past productively and assert the performative nature of memory is an awareness of the precarious mocking of the performative by the event, the paradox Franko writes about and that I have discussed

¹² Annette Kuhn, 'A Journey Through Memory' in Susannah Redstone (ed.), *Memory and Methodology*, New York and Oxford: Berg, 2000, pp. 179–196 (186–187).

in Chapter Three,¹³ a temporal trick played by trauma on the notion of the performative nature of remembering, a trick which problematises any overinvestment in the productive value of the awareness of the performativity of memory. For, as Derrida writes: '[a] pure event, worthy of the name, defeats the performative as much as the constative. One day we'll have to come to terms with what this means.'¹⁴ The complexity of coming to terms with just what that may mean is likewise addressed by Franko: 'the event disarms the performative by effectively removing its capacity to respond. The event leaves the act "speechless"'.¹⁵ It is in proximity to that 'speechlessness', amidst the 'wreckage' of memory, that the creative practitioner in the present is placed, and not in the space of narrative memory which would offer a possibility of fast-routing individuals and communities into a new set of stories with which to transform the ways they 'live in and relate to the present and the future', either to reassure them in their life narratives or help them change their lives. This is an important point to take on above all in the context of politics, where such naïveté never fails to yield catastrophic consequences, and where there is already a smooth ideological machine in place incessantly churning and overproducing ready-made narratives that create noise over that speechless temporality and preclude any individual, biographical or biological, grappling with trauma.

To attend to this speechlessness, I am examining the role of memory and forgetting as the vulnerable link between the biological and the ethical. To do this, I have distinguished, as Bennett suggests in *Emphatic Vision*, drawing on the terminology of Charlotte Delbo, poet and Holocaust survivor, between two types of memory, 'deep memory' or 'sense memory' that indicates the memory processes related to traumatic experiences and their affective impact; and 'ordinary memory', in which 'events are interpreted and placed

¹³ Chapter Three, p. 100.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event', trans. Gila Walker, *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2007, vol. 33, no. 2: 441–461 (460).

¹⁵ Mark Franko, 'Given Movement: Dance and the Event', p. 116.

within a temporal and narrative framework.¹⁶ A similar distinction between two types of memory can be found in the writing of Janet:

[Normal memory,] like all psychological phenomena, is an action; essentially it is an action of telling a story [...] A situation has not been satisfactorily liquidated [...] until we have achieved, not merely an outward reaction through our movements, but also an inward reaction through the words we address to ourselves, through the organization of the recital of the event to others and to ourselves, and through the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history [...] Strictly speaking, then, one who retains a fixed idea of a happening cannot be said to have a “memory” [...] It is only for convenience that we speak of it as a “traumatic memory”.¹⁷

Janet’s description of the workings of normal memory is strikingly resonant with the narrative impulse of certain forms of performance. The representational gesture of narrative imagination, it could then perhaps be argued, is a similar form of ‘liquidating’ a real life situation through movements and words, through this ‘recital of the event’. What is then put in its place is the narrative thread of storytelling that weaves the new event into the background of what one has hitherto been able to integrate, to affectively, intellectually, intuitively – playfully or painfully – link with one’s sense of self and one’s community.

The insistence on the importance of re-creating narratives is almost universal among the medical professionals, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts working with trauma survivors. However, Tal’s writing that I refer to in the second chapter¹⁸ points to the necessity of distinguishing the shattering of our personal sets of beliefs, of our personal myths, from the social myths that are undone in the aftermaths of violence. In the same way that the survivor begins to *represent* for the rest of the society a terrible shattering of the society’s myth about the universal protection of the human right to life, so the frozen image of traumatic memory easily becomes the ground upon which the symbolic

¹⁶ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, p. 355.

¹⁷ Pierre Janet, *Psychological Healing*, vol. 1, trans. E. Paul and C. Paul, New York: Macmillan 1925 [1919], pp. 661–663, cited in Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 37.

¹⁸ See p. 73 of the thesis.

structure of the many is re-built on the shattering of the few – where these ‘few’ should not be taken literally, their numbers may be very great indeed, and yet their placement outside the shared symbolic universe deems them inaccessible, ‘untouchable’ and untouched by the commonality of language and of social space. If art is to approach such experiences it inevitably must leave behind this sphere of commonality, it must paradoxically leave behind the shared language to re-enter a different sense of communal memory that is a fiction to be made in the shared future and not a given image of the past – with Campbell’s *1001 nights cast* being an excellent example of just such a community and such a notion of futurity.

The contribution of trauma studies to the field of memory studies rests perhaps most pertinently in its continual re-marking on this blind spot within the notion of memory-as-recollection, inasmuch as the notion of memory as re-collecting implicates a certain centralising principle, as well as a sense of narrative control over experience.

And whereas in the work of psychologists, such as Janet, the experience is understood in the light of processing of events by mechanisms innate to the mind, social and cultural theory argues for the view of experience as subjectively lived but culturally shared, not innate to the human mind.¹⁹ In the light of such theory, trauma as ‘failed experience’, in the words of Ernst van Alphen, points to the discursive nature of experience, and questions another, social normative use of experience as a means to an undisputed access to reality. Van Alphen draws on feminist scholarship in particular to support his argument that ‘experience of an event or history is dependent on the terms symbolic order offers’.²⁰ Developing this argument to advocate and acknowledge a ‘semiotic incapacity’²¹

¹⁹ Cf. Ernst van Alphen, ‘Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma’, in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (eds), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press 1998, pp. 24–38 (37).

²⁰ Especially in the work of Teresa de Lauretis and Joan W. Scott. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

in the failure of the survivors of trauma to relate the events to which they are urged to bear witness, the issue is no longer simply one of a representational failure. What takes place in these situations is a 'stalling of [the] discursive process'²² that is already present at the time of the event and is not a later failure to 're-connect' with it inside a linear timeframe.

Symbolisation appears to be the crucial faculty that is lost in trauma. For trauma 'cannot be represented. The symbolic cannot carry it: trauma makes a tear in the symbolic network itself.'²³ Or, stated less definitely but linked acutely to the lived experience: 'The pain and terror of war and social violence often overwhelm and sometimes destroy our apparatus for perception and its representations because their terrible spectacles often paralyze our capacity for symbolization.'²⁴ There is a deep sense of safety in the symbolic, in the sense that even in its most pathological aspects the symbolic function means that the external event has been somehow integrated, that a link has been created with what Gampel has identified in her practice as the 'background of safety'.²⁵

Gampel distinguishes two polar concepts through which the individual experiencing social violence relates to the world, the 'background of safety' and the 'background of the uncanny'. The background of safety relates to the complex sense of the social space created through the primary identification of the child with the parent and developed through the 'continuity of being in a constant social context'²⁶ allowing for complex affective threads to develop and sustain us in our psychological and physical well-being; whereas the background of the uncanny is derived from the notion of the uncanny

²² Ibid., p. 27.

²³ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, p. 5.

²⁴ Yolanda Gampel, 'Reflections on the prevalence of the uncanny in social violence', p. 55.

²⁵ In Yolanda Gampel, 'Between the Background of Safety and the Background of the Uncanny in the Context of Social Violence', in Peter Fonagy, Arnold M. Cooper and Robert S. Wallerstein (eds), *Psychoanalysis on the Move: the Work of Joseph Sandler*, New York, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 59–74 (the notion was originally theorised by Joseph Sandler in 'The Background of Safety', *Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1960, vol. 41: 352–365).

²⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

as introduced by Freud to refer to a very particular quality within what excites fear, a sense that does not relate to 'a symptom, behaviour or neurotic organization [but to] lived experience ('erlebnis') without significations, which cannot be translated into words.'²⁷ It is these two backgrounds that Gampel argues become entirely dissociated among people who have undergone extreme experiences.

And while art has always addressed, challenged and disturbed our symbols, with their removal, just as in life after major trauma, there are no easy solutions for re-establishing the safety net[work] of the symbolic. This removal is at once a symptom and a challenge of the traumatic occurrence, it is both a residue of its immediately dissociated impact, an actual paralysis of the symbolic function that cannot be dismissed, and an unprecedented 'encounter' with the (arguably) unmediated impact of the 'unthinkable and the unrepresentable or unspeakable'²⁸ affective space of trauma.

The perplexing nature of this 'impossible' encounter is explained in cognitive psychology as the failure of the symbolic and linguistic modes in the brain to organise the frightening event in words and symbols. Instead, what people experience when they are exposed to trauma is 'speechless terror',²⁹ in which experience is organised on a somatosensory or iconic levels. Indeed, in its most extreme cases, even the somatosensory and iconic levels are shattered in the aftermath of traumatic exposure. In his book *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*, Robert Jay Lifton interprets the 'death imprint' of such extreme traumatic exposure as 'total "desymbolization", a breakdown of inner imagery of connection, integrity, and motion, an absolute loss of the sense of human continuity'.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁸ Yolanda Gampel, 'Reflections on the prevalence of the uncanny in social violence', p. 49.

²⁹ Bessel van der Kolk, in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 172.

³⁰ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979, p. 502.

So if all the layers of safety are broken with these exposures, can they somehow be expected to re-gather? Is it possible to work with the narrative force to re-establish a sense of continuity and connection through a certain re-visiting? Or do these exposures instead pose a challenge to how we conceive of memory? Traumatic experience may point to a lacuna in the structure of memory where we can find a way of working with the paradoxical cohabitation of traumatic 'anti'-memory and consciousness without *forcing* a resolution. In this respect it is interesting to note that in his *Being Singular Plural* Nancy insists on the importance of the symbolic function for the very being of a society, but affirms that this function is based on a word which in its original Greek meaning simply stood for being "put with", for making a connection, where 'the Greek *sumbolon* was a piece of pottery broken in two pieces when friends or a host and his guest, parted. Its joining would later be a sign of recognition.'³¹

Sense of Memory

Another fact we may deduce from the notion of radioactivity proposed by Gampel, although she focuses on the psychological aspects of trauma and does not engage with the body explicitly in her argument, is how trauma lays bare the porosity of our corporeal borders, of the surface of our skin, and invites other modes of engagement that will take this porosity and the corporeality of our subjectivities into consideration and challenge us to take on – in the context of these extreme experiences where the schism between our interior and exterior worlds may otherwise appear the most palpable – the seemingly paradoxical wager famously argued by Elizabeth Grosz in her Introduction to the book *Volatile Bodies*:

³¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 200, note 51.

The wager is that all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject's corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious. All the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface.³²

What happens to the narrative when neither traumatic wounding nor memory are sited into an interior, either psychologically or corporeally conceived, but are instead re-marked in the intensities and flows of such 'surface' subjectivities? In *Empathic Vision*, Bennett reminds us that although theorists of trauma and memory have thus far paid little attention to visual and performance art, it is here that we will find 'a long tradition of engagement with affect and immediate experience, not just as sources of inspiration or objects of representation, but as fundamental components of a dynamic between an artwork and the spectator.'³³ To further identify and analyse this dynamic, Bennett engages Deleuze's famous reconsideration of the theory of expression in art,³⁴ suggesting that conventional theories fail to engage with this immediate, 'surface' dynamic of art and performance 'insofar as they regard the artwork as the transcription or deposit of a prior mental state.'³⁵ Instead, as she proposes in another essay, '[e]xpressivity is perhaps simply that which deals directly with the consequences of the failure of narrative, investigating the process of memory where the objects of memory remain ill-defined: an art that takes as its object the workings of memory itself.'³⁶ My interest here is to engage the traumatic layers of memory and see how we could there again rephrase such a question about the ways

³² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington; and Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994, p. vii.

³³ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, p. 23.

³⁴ For an introduction to the notion of expression in the philosophy of Deleuze and Deleuze-Guattari, see Brian Massumi, 'Introduction. Like a thought' in Brian Massumi (ed.), *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, London, New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. xiii–xxxix.

³⁵ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, p. 24.

³⁶ Jill Bennett, 'Within Living Memory', in Jill Bennett and Jackie Dunn, *Telling Tales*, ex. cat., Sydney: College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, 1998, p. 11.

performance works with the notions of expressive, corporeal, sense memory, with ‘the working of memory itself’. Although one could argue that examples of such approaches to memory abound, from the work of Samuel Beckett to much contemporary visual and performance art, what Bennett suggests is far from obvious. Indeed, most theorists will find it impossible to grasp memory unless it is imagined via a metaphor, which is itself a significant narrative device. ‘How can we grasp memory itself? It is virtually impossible to imagine memory – what it is, how it works, where it lies – without recourse to metaphor.’³⁷ In the same text, the authors suggest that the metaphors we use to objectify memory turn the *temporality* of remembering into a spatial and ‘intensely visual’ phenomenon, where the position of the viewer, although left in question, is always at some distance from memory, so much so that the only way to abolish distance between (a) self and (its) memory for the authors becomes possible through a process of ‘assimilation’; and even then the authors remain unsure whether such content would indeed still be memory at all, for that would leave us with the unresolved question of ‘[w]ho controls [this] scene?’³⁸

I will engage with the question of the metaphor in more detail later on in the chapter but I have included this example of a very different take on memory to help me lay out what I consider key difficulties in engaging artistically with traumatic memory. Most importantly, the challenge is to redefine the notion of a self, not as a fixed identity but as a dynamic system that could still ‘work’ in situations where our usual notions of the self are shattered, invaded by ‘traumatic identification’. Another difficulty is how to resist, in the context of what is always in some of its key aspects a visual art, the spatialisation and visualisation that objectivises memory, and engage also with memory’s temporal dimension that unlocks this relationship from its entrapment in objectification; thirdly, how to forgo

³⁷ Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, ‘Introduction: Forecasting Memory’, in Michael Lambek and Paul Antze (eds), *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, London, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. xi.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

the seemingly natural recourse to metaphor in our relation to these experiences and utilise notions that bring the metaphorical closer not only to the embodied but to the cryptic as the unavailable aspect of that embodied experience. Finally there is the issue of (creative) control, the issue of 'unmaking' distance by forgoing the question of control, of shifting the question of 'who controls this scene'. This final shift has profound implications on the notion of an artist's intentionality – moving away from representation to action and then to giving agency, not giving up on it but re-distributing agency. In Ettinger's terms, art in this concept is a metramorphosis, a co-poietic activity; not a solitary mission of an Artist-Genius-Hero but a transgressive, borderlinking Event and Encounter that has the potential to spread the matrixial thinking across the frontiers-become-thresholds of culture.³⁹

The agency in such work is shared in complex ways with the audiences; and in this case more importantly with the traumatised individual / community who are thus no longer placed in the position of providing themes for, or being objects of, an artwork; or patronised into the position of being helped by those 'in the know'. The question of *control* becomes an interesting point where both sides in this relationship are made more fragile: an artist needs total control over the (however limited) space of his/her creation, whereas control over a situation is the major thing that is taken away from the traumatised individual or community; so the question of how to take control over any aspect of one's life becomes perhaps the most painful re-learning of a certain freedom and a point where art may enable a certain shift.

Campbell's project provides some possible answers to the particular strategies of negotiating control and agency in such co-poietic work. The complexity of sharing that happens in situations where artists enter specific communities rather than creating an

³⁹ Cf. Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 88.

open situation in which such a community gathers over time around a specific project (as in the case of Campbell's project) is potently described in the following words of the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko:

There are hundreds of reasons why people would mistrust the situation. [...]. In terms of psychological developmental theory – and here Winnicott's work is very relevant – potential users must, in some manner, destroy the project and myself. I have to be destroyed, the project has to be destroyed, if we are to proceed together. Then they need to see if the project and I will survive our psychological destruction. And once they, or someone else, determine that I have survived, they may decide that the project can be used in some way.

Once they determine that they can use me – and I can use them – we may begin. Once we can use each other, we begin to trust each other. And once we trust, we can begin to play. These are a triad of Winnicott's theory: use, trust, and play. In this case, the transitional object can be the instrument, myself, or the project.⁴⁰

How can art reconstruct histories of catastrophic events from the memories of survivors? Can it ever really do this? And is it even something artists should ever engage in? If it can, if artists may have unique means at their disposal to relay these events, what may such means be? What are the tools and structures that can turn 'space-time-matter into act, site and gesture'?⁴¹ And what of performance and live art specifically in this context? What do all these questions mean when they refer to the hybrid art forms whose unique means involve living human bodies as both subjects and objects of an artwork, especially when these questions are concerned with such problematic histories? Caught in its intoxicating affair with fiction theatre all too often shows how deceptive the promise of a display of embodied empathy may, or indeed must always be. But what about performance, where if anything is staged, it may well be the very impossibility of this promise? If empathy has proved suspiciously self-serving, what other forms of affectivity may be better suited to the task of relaying these histories? Wodiczko's description of the dynamic of building trust

⁴⁰ Patricia C. Phillips, 'Creating Democracy: A Dialogue with Krzysztof Wodiczko', *Art Journal*, Winter 2003, vol. 62, no. 4: 33–47 (39, 42).

⁴¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Gesture and Commentary', in Dorota Glowacka, Stephen Boos (eds), *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*; Albany: SUNY Press, 2002, p. 82.

through the complex notion of usage, of the ability to undergo a process of decomposition of a project in order for its usage value to become established and create a sense of trust points to a far more complex field of both ethics and affectivity in relating these histories. It also points to a shift in the nature of these questionings as it avoids simply identifying the artist as the mouthpiece of the subaltern, of those who do not have a voice in public discourse. What is proposed instead is suggested in Wodiczko's notion of the prosthetic object, a technological device that serves as an intermediary and as protection, an opening into public space. The idea of the prosthetic object⁴² is in no way limited to mechanical or technological devices but encompasses the artist and the project as well; above all, it materialises the artificiality of art as just such a prosthesis, as a vital albeit destructible object or scenario for an alternative vision of public space as 'a site of enactment'⁴³ of social relation.

The question of art with-in community has remained a 'dormant' theme of my thesis, a promise of a future project overtaken by the complexity of grappling with the theoretical implications of the complex dynamic of how imagination relates to trauma, and of the 'surface' subjectivity and memory in performance. There may be many possible reasons why I have found it impossible to articulate more extensively the desired context of art in community although much of this thesis articulates strategies in art that explicitly engage with the complex dynamic of social traumatic memory. Most obviously, this reluctance concerns the gap between the event of trauma and any subsequent relating of an ordered / sympathetic / organised social space of continuation in which testimony can be analysed and theorised, of testimony at a temporal distance and still marked by a belief that not only the interviewer or an analyst, or educator, would act as sympathetic

⁴² The highly influential theories of the prosthesis originate with the writing of the mathematician Norbert Wiener. Cf. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. 2nd ed., Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965.

⁴³ Phillips and Wodiczko, 'Creating Democracy', p. 35.

listeners, where testimony in its performative sense is always addressed at an other, where it is understood as an 'appeal to the community'.⁴⁴ But what does such testimony entail in a post-war situation in which no community has yet been reinstated, or indeed can be reinstated, in the 'erased' communal space of post-war situations, in places where borders and identities have been reframed violently through war operations? My simple wish was to work in the context of my 'original' community in the Balkans where for the majority of the population, underneath the veneer of lives changed with modernisation, complex networks of family and social and economic links are still ruled by strong communal taboos that bar any confrontation with traumatic events, and a highly skewed view of morality. In this context, and with the awareness of my own 'removed' position in the course of this research, what has felt more pertinent, far more urgent for me to articulate, are the theoretical and practical tools, and a language able to grapple with the reasons why trauma escapes any direct modes of address. Increasingly, what this has led me to is the focus on what happens when artists engage auto/biographical material and their bodies, two least questioned and apparently least questionable properties of human subjects, as just such 'prosthetic devices' for relaying trauma.

If we agree with what psychoanalysis teaches us, as noted by Pollock in her introduction to the *Afterlife of Memory* conference, that 'subjectivity is precisely a living being with memory',⁴⁵ and if memory can only be told, re-created, narrated, shared, then the impact trauma has on the textures of memory will produce a crisis in our very ability to act as subjects, as equal partners on the historical and social stages where the pressures to inform and testify to events of personal and societal catastrophes are ever increasingly

⁴⁴ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992, p. 204.

⁴⁵ Griselda Pollock, 'Director's Introduction', Programme, Congress CATH V, The Afterlife of Memory, University of Leeds, School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies, 5–8 July 2006.

forceful. In a world where the ability to articulate and convince those further removed from the traumatic events of the genuineness of our grievances may be the only hope for a resolution for an increasingly large number of people, the stakes of our links to our memories become very high indeed; at the same time, their collapse means that our memories are more than ever 'up for grabs' by all those willing and able to fulfil the testimonial role (be it journalists, aid workers, politicians, social theoreticians, ethnographers, and in a significant way also artists). This paradox triggers an impulse to protect ever more strongly our 'proprietary' rights over our histories and our, even if problematic or non-existent, memories, and to barricade ourselves, or even entire nations and societies whose identities rest in no lesser degree on the strong notion of shared memories / histories, in order to protect this (often unacknowledged) lost sense of subjectivity and of agency that forms the slippery ground of such memory politics.

The situation becomes even more complex in cases where one is both the 'victim' and the 'other', the informant, and the very small amount of people able to take on both subject positions in relation to extreme trauma is telling of the difficulty involved in making such a leap. Among strategies performance may bring into this deeply traumatised space of a 'proprietary' crisis of memory and of subjectivity I am interested in an ambiguous strategy that again shifts the locus of control over the event, whereby the artist seemingly gives up on her agency in the event so that the audiences are to some degree, openly or unwillingly, granted the authorial role; in some cases, the audiences are given almost total control over the artist and the work.

This strategy makes obvious the lack of agency that is the most profoundly debilitating aspect of any experience of trauma; but more importantly, it opens up a potential for a scenario whereby agency may be won back through this very passivity.

Marina Abramović's famous *Rhythm 0* performance⁴⁶ is an obvious example of this reversal of the active / passive dynamic but I want to include here another example that sits less easily within the gendered dichotomy of that dynamic. It is the artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña's early solo performance *The Loneliness of the Immigrant* of 1979, in which Gómez-Peña, carefully wrapped in an indigenous Mexican Indian floral-patterned fabric secured by ropes, was left on the floor of a public elevator in Los Angeles, the city where he had arrived a year before from Mexico as an aspiring immigrant artist. The artist remained passive for twenty-four hours during which the only clue he offered to his unwitting audiences was a text attached to the wall, noticed by very few and never mentioned by the artist in subsequent essays that dealt with the piece, reading:

Moving to another country hurts more than moving to another house, another face, another lover.... In one way or another we are all or will be immigrants. Surely one day we will be able to crack this shell open, this unbearable loneliness, and develop a transcontinental identity.⁴⁷

Los Angeles-based writer and theorist Meiling Cheng's *In Other Los Angeleses* brings forth a complex analysis of this piece, balancing its seminal importance for the artist, and for a whole series of works dealing with issues of marginal identities in Los Angeles to which the piece was a precursor, with what she sees as its problematic politics: the artist's refusal within the piece to provide clues and offer contact that would give his audience a chance to engage in a political dialogue. This, Cheng argues, triggers an inevitable self-fulfilling xenophobic scenario: 'Unable to reach a definite conclusion, someone kicks the

⁴⁶ *Rhythm 0* is a durational performance where Abramović invited her audience to do whatever they wanted to her using any of the 72 items she provided, which included a pen, scissors, chains, an axe, a loaded pistol; but also a rose and a bottle of perfume. Notorious for the fact that at Galleria Studio Morra in Naples, in 1974, after a total of six hours the audience's interventions got to be more and more violent until a member of the audience held the pistol (loaded with a single bullet) to the artist's head, making her finger hold the trigger. It was only the intervention from other members of the audience that stopped him. Cf. Lynn MacRitchie, 'Marina Abramović: Exchanging Energies', *Performance Research*, 1996, vol. 1, no. 2: 27–34.

⁴⁷ Meiling Cheng, 'A Hetero-locus in Process', *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 174–183 (174).

package; another fondles it; a few confess to it; many curse it. A dog pees on it. Suddenly screams in Spanish break out when a frustrated elevator passenger threatens to stab it/him [...].⁴⁸ The artist was eventually picked up by security guards, who threw him into an industrial disposal bin, treating him in a manner prescribed for abandoned unidentified packages left in public spaces.

Cheng describes the affective field of the performance through its 'melancholic tone and sense of catatonia'⁴⁹ that in her opinion both mark and preclude its success, plunging its involuntary audiences / witnesses into a melancholic, catatonic sense of what loneliness feels like but denying them any possibility of productive dialogic exchange. Finally the event becomes truly culturally and politically influential only through what Cheng terms tertiary audiences, those (like myself) who learn about the piece from visual and written evidence and from the artist's subsequent written and spoken testimonies that clearly state the political, autobiographical and thematic stakes of the original event.

Through an engagement with trauma as a performative force I read this piece in a different key. I do not see it as offering to the viewer the blank (or even the floral-xenophobic) canvas for a projection or even an insight into loneliness or the situation of the immigrant subject. All these elements are present in the piece, but where it becomes political and not a subjective, reflective comment on a previously existing state of loneliness is in the way it gives an extension to traumatic affect in the materiality of a particular social time and space; in the way it inhabits and endures in the thickness of the time and space of trauma that is not a given but temporally and physically shapes itself through performance, and reverberates through its subsequent documentation and written testimony. Its politics is indeed impossible outside of its full trajectory for it is an affective politics of an embodied lack of identity that provokes anxiety as much in what we designate as an 'outside' of the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 175.

subject as it does 'inside' what we wish to identify as the artist's proper self. It is not only after I learn that this living package contains the artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña who feels a sense of isolation and loneliness and desires a certain political redress of the status of the immigrant that the piece has really entered the sphere of my culture and my politics, for the two could never exist with-out my affective and affected body-politics. Although the former aspect of the work has its role in my understanding, the identity politics that it promotes only comes after other complex forms of knowing for which the sense of melancholy and catatonia, the provoked anxiety, and even aggression, are performative tools for an anatomy lesson into the dynamic of immigration, a lesson not known in advance and one that cannot fully take place except with and through the performative force of its traumatic duration, the twenty-four hours that Cheng never really revisits in her analysis.

The work's temporal dimension ensures that the performance does not become a manipulative, self-fulfilling prophecy of xenophobia and muteness. Instead, the bareness and precision of its scenario opens up the possibility for the performative force of trauma to unfold without recourse to the deceptive emphatic identification either with the self or with the immigrant other. In this sense I see this work belonging to a certain vein of works that engage with passivity as an aesthetic device and an ethical stance that undoes the magnetism of mimetic identification and opens up a space for a different sort of response, one that is much closer to the notion of 'heteropathic identification' and 'heteropathic memory'. Heteropathic identification and memory are notions theorised by Kaja Silverman⁵⁰ as ways of experiencing beyond what is known by the self, beyond the self's psychic grinding of the outside to the inside that the psychoanalyst Piera Aulagnier writes about as the way our conscious self interiorises and metabolises otherness,⁵¹ which

⁵⁰ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

⁵¹ Piera Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation*, trans. Alan Sheridan. Hove, East Sussex: Brunner-

I will develop further in the next chapter.

What are the concerns of such heteropathic works when they affectively engage with trauma? What are the shifts in understanding experience that are needed in order to produce what Silverman calls ‘identification-at-a-distance’? And what other possible positions can artists inhabit along the charged lines of such uncanny disseminations of trauma? I would argue that it is again about creating an altogether other embodied language in which we could imagine a different kind of relay, not a dissemination only but a gestation, an understanding that instead of disseminating further the ever increasingly frantic relays of catastrophes art may, or even must, provide a different sense of connection with trauma in the present, one that is both forceful enough to resist the powerful pull of such reverberations and gentle enough to provide space / time / matter and sustenance for the slow transformation of trauma. We can provide this sustenance in performance through duration, through fragmented narrative, through a force that exceeds narrative functions, as in Campbell’s project, where I invoked the notion of the strange attractor to describe how these elements weave themselves together intricately through that excess of affect and over the project’s long duration.

From Testimony to Wit(h)nessing: With This Shadow on Her Shoulders

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s 1992 book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* marked a certain performative turn in the understanding of the role of testimony and/in its relation to history.⁵² The book, a joint effort of a scholar focused on literary theory, psychoanalysis and law and a practicing psychoanalyst, itself performed a meeting of two different approaches to testimony by

Routledge, 2001, p. 5. Cf. Chapter Five in this Thesis.

⁵² As was indeed remarked by Alan Bass, who reviewed the book in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 1994, vol. 63: 146–150 (147).

attempting to bridge the gap between the clinical understanding of psychoanalysis as an individual, *private* endeavour, and the wider theoretical project of bringing psychoanalysis to bear upon our understanding of society and history, and importantly for this analysis, also of art. The book marked testimony as the disputed ground claimed in equal measures by the legal, historical, clinical and poetic discourses. Usually understood as a legal and historical source of information, testimony in their reading became above all the site and mode of sharing by which subjectivity could be reclaimed and recovered by those afflicted by traumatic events.⁵³ The authors' writing itself testifies to the importance of this sharing that is usually brushed aside in post-conflict situations under the pressures of a certain legal and historical demand for objectivity that calls for painstaking and careful distinguishing of facts from the fragmentary and clearly personal, ambiguous testimonial address. While the affective 'mess' of testimony is usually dismissed as a therapeutic concern, or removed in a utilitarian manner from testimony understood as an attributable verbal account, in Felman and Laub's reading the very ambiguity of testimony points to the easily compromised nature of any such notion of objectivity. It shows implicated in the requirement for objectivity the assumption that we can somehow leave behind the complexity and ambiguity of our individual relations to history and extract from them a kind of solid knowledge that could be safely shifted from the individual onto the social sphere without any traumatic residue. Instead, the authors see testimony as a crisis-inducing event in which any insistence on reaching certainty is suspended to allow for an act of witness to unfold.

⁵³ The stress on the difference introduced to the concept of testimony by emphasising its performative quality that marks it 'as a humanizing, transactive process', and confronting it to the more common conception of testimony as a source of historical information has been proposed by Ernst Van Alphen in his essay 'The Revivifying Artist: Boltanski's Efforts to Close the Gap', in Lisa Saltzman and Eric M. Rosenberg (eds), *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006, pp. 222–246 (227).

The victim's narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence.⁵⁴

Laub is a strong advocate of testimony as an alternative to what he terms 'dramatic fragmentation' of trauma survivors, and believes that only in the creation of testimony the knowing can take place. However, this testimony can only emerge in the presence of a passionate listener. This resonance of the testimonial address with a certain performance of knowing oneself before the other, before the 'passionate listener', is problematised by Laub through the notion of the 'impossible witness', where witness is linked to a 'truth of what happens during an event',⁵⁵ and still dependent on a humanistic frame so that the impossibility of witness is seen to result from the destruction of the notion of 'common humanity'⁵⁶ in situations of trauma, especially situations of anonymous atrocity and massive trauma.

The link that testimony maintains with the sensorial and iconic content of a frightening event from one's traumatic past is recognised by Caruth as relating not to 'the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival.'⁵⁷ It is survival that endlessly asserts itself in the Freudian compulsion to repeat (as much as in the urgency of testimony), Caruth argues. The sense of fright that is caused by a lack of preparedness and that Freud establishes as the key to the time lapse in the recognition of threat characteristic of trauma, the fact of '*waking into consciousness*'⁵⁸ from the traumatic fright, of having survived without knowing the threat of death one has confronted, this 'incomprehensibility of one's own survival', Caruth suggests, is what lies

⁵⁴ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony*, p. 57.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, citing Camus, p. 199.

⁵⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 60.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

at the heart of Freud's notion of the death drive – 'not the traumatic imposition of death but rather the traumatic "awakening" to life.'⁵⁹

The difficulty of the testimonial 'vow to tell'⁶⁰ becomes especially striking with regard to such perplexing nature of the traumatic *waking* 'into' survival that seems to be the testimony's only resource in establishing the 'truth' of the traumatic encounter. Such an act of witnessing invites both the speaker and the listener to remain with-in the incongruity of the testimonial address. It shows that the importance of testimony rests in the fact that – unlike understanding or remembrance – testimony maintains the link with the traumatic 'remainder' of our experience of history without abandoning it for the sake of constructing knowledge or assimilating traumatic excess into cognition. Thus Felman writes:

This knowledge or self-knowledge [that we arrive at by means of testimony] is neither a given before the testimony nor a residual substantial knowledge consequential to it. In itself, this knowledge *does not exist*, it can only *happen* through the testimony: it cannot be separated from it.⁶¹

Felman's attention given to the lived experience of knowledge points to the nature of a certain move between the two modes of understanding testimony which asks from us not the abandoning of any hope of knowledge of past events but a certain *retuning* of our attitude to knowledge. The ubiquitous silence of the survivors, instead of being theorised through the notion of a representational failure, may be tackled perhaps far more productively through a thorough understanding of what exactly is involved in the 'stalling of [the] discursive process'⁶² linked to trauma. Even if we agree that the question of the 'failure of representation' is not some post-event failure to communicate an overwhelming

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

⁶⁰ Shoshana Felman, in Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 17.

⁶¹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony*, p. 51.

⁶² Ernst van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma', p. 27.

past experience but a quality immanent in the event itself, the question remains of how will we define this affective level of knowing.

The phenomenological notion of the lived body is meant to provide a theoretical framework that would bring our awareness closer to our own bodies as experienced by each individual subject. As such, the notion of the lived body is not too far removed from Bakhtin's argument about the radical situatedness and dialogic nature of each individual subject, with each body marking the unique place of each subject in the world, for which only that individual subject is called and able to answer. And yet I wish to argue that, although the notion of the lived body has made possible a significant theoretical move and discarded with the habit of hierarchically placing conscious knowledge above immediate experience, the focus on the somatic as the 'proper' affective level of knowledge that could address the failure of representation in fact has not yet reached the traumatic crypt that is not identical to the somatic sphere of the lived body.

So far this argument is something that has already become familiar and is not easily disputed from the point of view of anyone involved in art, and especially in performance as arguably the very art of such a lived body. But the next move for the art that approaches trauma necessitates a further theoretical operation. For not only is it true that the sensory realm is constitutive of knowledge as such but there are levels of the material operations of knowledge that are inaccessible even to the soma and to the unconscious experience, they short-circuit the very notion of experience. What the apparent absence of any knowledge in trauma reveals is perhaps much closer to what Massumi has termed *unexperience*, a 'vanishing point [that] lies at the very limit of the phenomenal'.⁶³

The importance of theorising this level of *unexperience* and approaching an aesthetics that could address it is at the heart of the ethical concern of my thesis. Why this is an ethical

⁶³ Brian Massumi, 'Fear (The Spectrum Said)', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, special issue *Against Preemptive War*, March 2005, vol. 13, no. 1: 31–48 (43).

issue and not just a question of reformulating the notions of knowledge and perception to encompass the level of traumatic unknowing is strongly linked to the new affective forms of subjection and relates to the specificity of how affect is analysed by Massumi. A particular aspect of his complex analysis that spans a number of essays and books is given in his 2005 essay 'Fear (The Spectrum Said)', through tracing the context of the new kind of operations of power in the US in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Massumi warns of the 'affective modulation of the populace' undertaken by the US government at the time through a colour-coded terror alert systems introduced to 'communicate' the possibility of any follow-up terrorist attacks. Massumi sees this move as an unprecedented mode of mass control of public anxiety and notes the profound difference in the operations of biopower that the new modes of 'affective' rule are making possible, by 'train[ing] into the population wirelessly jacked central government functioning directly into each individual's nervous system.'⁶⁴ The colour-coded system is but an example of a profound shift in the new operations of power that involve a certain 'affective attunement' of vast numbers of people through a heightened state of non-localised fear. One aspect of this shift that is especially significant for this argument is that it replaces the notion of social imitation as a means of political control and introduces instead a far more intangible form of subjection through such 'jacking' populations into a common sense of irritability, a sense of control resulting in bodies 'react[ing] in unison without necessarily acting alike.'⁶⁵ Rather than reproducing form or transmitting definite content, Massumi points out, the alert system proved able to activate bodies directly, as a 'trigger mechanism.'⁶⁶ For performance to continue to challenge and counter these new constellations of power, the complex proliferations of narrative need to expand to include far more material operations able to act upon this

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

new negative space of permanent alert and of an irritable and vague affectivity. To begin to approach some of the possibilities of what such material operations of performance may encompass, I will start from the opposite end and address the common error of addressing trauma through metaphoric language.

‘With This Shadow on Her Shoulders’⁶⁷ is a phrase borrowed from a non-attributed short text on the artist Mona Hatoum circulated on the Internet: ‘During a visit to London in 1975, civil war broke out in Lebanon and she was forced into exile. With this shadow on her shoulders, her early works can be seen as a metaphor for eternal conflict and resistance.’ There is a certain anaesthetic effectiveness in the text’s use of a familiar metaphor; in the way the words ‘civil war’ and ‘exile’ are quickly re-solved in the image of ‘this shadow’ that suggests a certain knowingness and is then, conveniently and unquestioningly, placed on the artist’s shoulders; a working, resistance-producing shadow, heavy-on-the-shoulders. At the same time, in its un-reality, its non-sense, this familiar – and so all the more uncanny – image produces a pause, a space in which to somehow trap affect. Resisting the metaphor’s flight of imagination, it brings it back to its forsaken literalness and to the materiality of its image/s.

In his text on ‘Knowing and Not Knowing Massive Psychic Trauma: Forms of Traumatic Memory’, Laub reminds us that the ‘capacity for metaphor [...] cannot withstand atrocity’,⁶⁸ and yet metaphoric language is nowhere so prevalent as in public acts of remembering atrocity, in the monuments and memorials, made in stone, made in metal, made of words, and built in our (collective) effort to somehow contain the potentially overwhelming effect and affect of traumatic events.

⁶⁷ Online access. Available HTTP: <http://www.search.com/reference/Mona_Hatoum>.

⁶⁸ Dori Laub M.D. and Nanette C. Auerhahn, ‘Knowing and not Knowing Massive Psychic Trauma: Forms of Traumatic Memory’. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 1993, vol. 74: 287–302 (289).

In his structuring of ways of dealing with trauma on the basis of distance / proximity to the traumatic event, Laub indeed identifies metaphor as the eighth level of knowing trauma (the first seven being not knowing, fugue states, fragments, transference phenomena, overpowering narratives, life themes and witnessed narratives).⁶⁹ He also notes that metaphor, as the form of knowing trauma is ‘available primarily to those who have not been directly affected as victims nor as family members of victims;’ it is ‘those not directly affected by massive psychic trauma [who] know of it through experiencing *their own* conflicts and predicaments in its language and imagery’.⁷⁰

In this way, the overwhelming availability of and insistence on images and languages of suffering, so prevalent in our cultures’ systems of public ‘witnessing’, from the media to much fiction, while it may well serve the public’s need to experience its own predicaments, becomes precisely the way survivors are let down and abandoned in their effort to come to terms with their experience and, in Laub’s words, ‘reinstate the relationship between event, memory and personality’, where personality is clearly understood as deeply and irrevocably relational.

This discrepancy between the reality of trauma and its emotional impact on those who are further removed from the position of survivors rapidly increases the dangers of appropriating pain to some again inevitably other ends, so that the gap between the experience and its public echo, the space so saturated by silence with which we all become so fascinated, appears almost unbridgeable.

And yet, like most things, this metaphoric lure holds the key to its own undoing, which is in its literalness, and artists have been working with this literalness especially in the context of public memorials. Horst Hoheisel, based in Kassel, Germany, is one of these artists, famous for a number of projects of what has been termed anti-memorials. Hoheisel’s

⁶⁹ For a detailed analysis of all levels of traumatic memory, see *Ibid.*, pp. 287–302.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 300, emphasis added.

projects could be described as elaborate stagings of disappearance of monuments. In one of the earliest of such projects, Hoheisel answered a call to restore a fountain in front of the Town Hall in Kassel. The fountain originally donated by a Jewish citizen of Kassel called Sigmond Aschrott in 1908, and later destroyed by Nazi activists.⁷¹ In the 1980s, when the people of Kassel no longer remembered what had happened to the original fountain, it was the Kassel's Society for the Rescue of Historical Monuments that proposed that some form of the fountain and its history be restored and Hoheisel was commissioned to execute the new fountain during documenta VIII, part of the highly influential documenta series of art festivals in Kassel where the city is often engaged with large-scale urban interventions as a space for redress or response to cultural trauma through politically organised acts of sculptural and architectural intervention. This is how the artist describes his winning design:

*I have designed the new fountain as a mirror image of the old one, sunk beneath the old place in order to rescue the history of this place as a wound and as an open question, to penetrate the consciousness of the Kassel citizens so that such things never happen again.*⁷²

Hoheisel's negative-form monuments are highly productive approaches to the question of how we may best remember an absence by making that absence, and the wound of the removal of its problematic history, materially present as sculpted empty space that takes memory seriously, as a 'threat and as abyss'.⁷³ What becomes the placement of a literal absence in space in his negative-form monuments may perhaps be compared to

⁷¹ It was demolished during the night of 8–9 April 1939. For a detailed account see James E. Young 'Horst Hoheisel's Counter-memory of the Holocaust: The End of the Monument', online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.chgs.umn.edu/museum/memorials/hoheisel/>>.

⁷² From Horst Hoheisel, 'Rathaus-Platz-Wunde', in 'Aschrott-Brunnen – offene wunde der Stadtgeschichte' (Kassel, 1989), unpaginated; translated by James E. Young. Online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.chgs.umn.edu/museum/memorials/hoheisel/>>.

⁷³ Hanno Loew, 'Identity and Empty Reflections about Horst Hoheisel's Negative Memory and Yearning for Sacrifice'. Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies: University of Minnesota. Online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.chgs.umn.edu/museum/memorials/hoheisel/identity.html>>.

work with a similarly literal notion of absence in time in performance, but this temporal absence would not be a staging of silence but perhaps a certain performance of forgetting.

As to the literality of the absence of the body, it seems that the body as well is most absent when it is most literally there, as in Hatoum's 1994 installation *Corps étranger* (Foreign Body) in which the viewer is (again literally) swallowed into a confined space of a white cylindrical shell, documenting the intimacy of a living, noisy, inside-and-outs of the artist's (female) body, with its noises enveloping the visitor and the images of its interior filmed with techniques borrowed from medicine projected onto a circular video screen on the floor below the visitors' feet.⁷⁴ The Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta's series of impressions of her foreign body onto another foreign landscape in her *Siluetas Series* made from 1973 to 1980⁷⁵ is another example of remarking on a problematic history of the invisibility of women in the symbolic public space through a repetition, a doubling of absence. Mendieta focused specifically on immigrant South American women in the US, although her *Siluetas Series* can equally be interpreted as a persistent process of imprinting, burning the outline of Mendieta's own body's history into that landscape of her adopted home, sculpting it with grass, with earth, imprinting it into mud, into the vastness of the American landscape.

I have moved in this chapter through an admittedly complex series of shifts that show the transformations of the force of traumatic affectivity, from that which exceeds narrative, to that which persists in duration; and from that which creates problems to the

⁷⁴ For a detailed description of *Corps étranger*, see Desa Philippi, 'Mona Hatoum: Some Any No Every Body', in M. Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art In, Of, and From the Feminine*, exh. cat., Boston: ICA, MIT, and Kanaal Art Foundation, Boston: The MIT Press 1996, pp. 363–369 (366).

⁷⁵ For an in-depth analysis of Ana Mendieta's work as 'underscoring body's literal erasure', see Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History and Performance*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, and Rebecca Schneider, 'Literal shrouds and dreamscape re-interments' in *Explicit Body in Performance*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 117–125.

testimonial address to that which undoes the metaphor. These series of transformations have lead my research to focus in its final stages on the material testimony, where all of these aspects of creating performance, from narrative to time, and from fact to fiction, will be brought back the body's materiality in performance.

Chapter Five

Community of Wit(h)ness: Feminine Encounters

Resonant Bodies

The works I have been analysing so far in the thesis belong in the ‘tradition of highly authored situations that fuse social reality with carefully calculated artifice’, championed by the art historian and critic Claire Bishop in her influential essay on ‘The Social Turn’, works where ‘inter-subjective relations [are] not an end in themselves, but rather [serve] to unfold a more complex knot of concerns about pleasure, visibility, engagement and the conventions of social interaction’¹ – and, importantly for my research, where such concerns are always interlocked with the problematics of disturbance or absence of some, or all of the listed aspects of sociality.

In this chapter I will focus on some examples of performance practices which provide very little social or representational context and where the focus is shifted entirely to the body’s materiality in performance. The ‘social turn’ is arguably far more difficult to pin down in practices where body is no longer so clearly employed as a marker of cultural specificity or a bearer of narrative content, but what has interested me is how by removing the naturalised links between the performing body and the biographical, cultural or narrative content, such works can engage with the urgency of a gender- and bio-politics in which issues of sociality are fully implicated in the body and its immediate environment. I am interested in articulating some of the means by which, rather than retreating into a kind of universalism in which the social and political situatedness of the body is erased,

¹ Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents’, in Margriet Schavemaker and Mischa Rakier (eds), *Right About Now: Art and Theory since the 1990s*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2007, pp. 58–68 (67).

or on the other extreme laying claim to an authenticity of presence, such works can stage the body's situatedness in its micropolitical context, as 'a site in which narrative threads of the personal, sexual, social and political knot and unknot in shifting permutations', as this minute focus on the body has been described in an artist's statement by Kira O'Reilly, artist whose piece *Stair Falling* I will analyse in most detail in the chapter. But to try and weave a theoretical ground from which I will approach the works, the first notion I want to introduce is that of the resonant body, theorised by the Brazilian psychoanalyst, curator and cultural critic Suely Rolnik.

Rolnik relates the notion of the resonant body to a subcortical capacity² of our senses which exists simultaneously yet in a paradoxical relationship with the senses' capacity for perception. While perception is essential in creating stability and organising the world in forms and is linked to language, on the subcortical level,

the other is a living presence composed of a malleable multiplicity of forces that pulse in our sensible texture, thus becoming part of our very selves. Here the figures of subject and object dissolve, and with them, that which separates the body from the world.³

Rolnik's mapping of the resonant body is a significant theoretical intervention in the phenomenological idea of the lived body. Lived body has been theorised as a generative agency of the conscious subject, of an embodied subjectivity that is never fully identical to what it cognitively conceives of as itself. Lived body similarly emphasises aspects of our self-awareness whereby we continually negotiate an awareness of a non-coincidence between our sensory experience and our conceptual knowledge. What the resonant body

² Although Rolnik refers to findings from neuroscience to corroborate her thesis, it is not clear which particular findings she is talking about. It is possible that she is referring to mirror neurons and their capacity to influence subcortical changes including alterations in our limbic area (limbic brain is a complex structure common to brains of all mammals that borders the neocortical brain and is specifically linked to 'nurturance, social communion, communication and play', Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, New York: Vintage Books, 2001, p. 32), our brainstem and our body proper.

³ Suely Rolnik, 'The Geopolitics of Pimping', trans. Brian Holmes, *transversal webjournal*, online access, available HTTP: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/rolnik/en/#_ftnref12>.

brings to this lived experience of subjectivity is the sense of a maximum resonance with the world, a living relation with the other which constantly destabilises subjectivity and renders it vulnerable as well as creative, open to continual re-attuning and growth. Rolnik argues that it is also on the level of the body's resonance that the totalitarian regimes exercise their most malicious power:

Destructively conservative, the totalitarian states go much further than a simple scorn or censorship of the expressions of the resonant body: they obstinately seek to disqualify and humiliate them, to the point where the force of creation, of which such expressions are the product, is so marked by the trauma of this vital terrorism that it finally blocks itself off, and is thereby reduced to silence.⁴

Once again, as with Massumi's notion of unexperience, of the virtual operations of affect that are inaccessible even to soma and to unconscious experience, this vital terrorism short-circuits the very notion of experience and leaves us wanting for another access to that sealed-off force of creation, of addressing 'the wound in desire',⁵ of an ability to draw the intimate cartography of the wound left behind by the trauma of these experiences. Without such a map, Rolnik argues, our anesthetised vulnerability cannot be reawakened and access to our vital force remains foreclosed. Rolnik points to a particularly difficult situation faced by people in the countries where totalitarian systems, be they the military dictatorships of South America or the totalitarian states of the former Soviet block and ex-Yugoslavia, have been replaced by neoliberalism. The flexible subjectivity of post-Fordian capitalism – with its tactic of wielding power through seduction and its appropriation of the promise of the 'paradise now', acting as what Rolnik terms the global pimp to this vital force – has appropriated the strong emancipatory traditions in these societies, especially the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s that often existed as underground movements and at significant personal risk to many of their protagonists. It has likewise

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Idem, 'Avoiding False Problems: Politics of the Fluid, Hybrid, and Flexible', *e-flux* journal, May 2011, no. 25, online access, available HTTP: <<http://e-flux.com/journal/view/230>>.

appropriated the idea of subjective freedom, of escaping the 'pathological rigidity of the identity principle'⁶ that was so characteristic of the totalitarian regimes from which these societies have been seeking emancipation. With both of these vital desires now caught in the equally deadly grasp of neoliberal politics, Rolnik challenges the artists to act not on the level of macropolitics but through urgent micropolitical interventions into that doubly traumatised, twice sealed-off force of creativity of these 'transitional' societies, traumatised all over again by this new form of vital terrorism.

What often complicates these micropolitical interventions is displacement that often results from these processes, and with which Rolnik herself is familiar, having spent over a decade in Paris consciously cutting off all contact with her culture and language before she was able to 'find' them again and return to Brazil. All of the artists whose works I have analysed so far negotiate at least two separate social and political realities and identities, even when, as with Tomić, these realities concern a single geographical location, marked, however, by a radical shift in ideology; or when, as with Campbell, the work consciously crosses the difficult boundary between private and social trauma and, even if just to a small degree, the boundary between 'us' and 'them' in a situation of an ongoing, even if physically distant war. What this multiplying of contexts creates is a sort of a double vision, an indeterminate space where creative interventions cannot happen within a stable, or however much unhinged but shared symbolic universe of a nation or a state, or some imagined global community. In this space of indeterminacy, micropolitical creative interventions belong more readily in the sphere of bio-politics, so that through engaging with their bodies as the main material and site for performance artists can stage such deterritorialisations – which is how Rolnik, a student of Deleuze, speaks of the ways of activating the resonant body – as material renegotiations and transformations of their

⁶ Idem, 'The Geopolitics of Pimping'.

own social and personal traumatic histories, both shaped and transformed through their creative processes.

I will once again be theorising these artistic strategies through the prism of traumatic affectivity activated as a certain excessive force, as a force that exceeds representation. While I have been developing throughout the thesis a structure with which to approach the various aspects of working with the bio-political through creating scenarios that activate the affective force of trauma, it is in the works most narrowly focused on the materiality of the body that the tensions between processes of signification and their continual undermining by the living systems' transformational dynamics most acutely approach the notion of structural trauma, of trauma as the very condition of the formation of the symbolic space of subjectivity. Another useful theoretical construct in this respect from Lacanian psychoanalysis is the central opposition in the mirror stage of development between the fragmented and the unified body, where the emerging ego's illusion of synthesis forms the unified body image as separate from the real body and is fully invested in the desire of the (m)Other so that subjectivity is founded on the split between body as lived and as image – a hysterical subjectivity founded on a resistance to and inevitability of potential fragmentation. However, whereas the notion of the fragment suggests breakage, separation and incompleteness, Rolnik's notion of resonance points to a different approach to this doubling of vision that comes with the formation of subjectivity, where the continuing vibration of the sub-symbolic space of feminine subjectivity is a cavity resonator, an instrument through which our consciousness continues to resonate with its environment. I will later argue that all of my chosen examples in some respect work with the performing body as feminine (which is entirely distinct from the fact that the majority of these works were made by women), but it is in the context of performance practices which focus on the body's materiality as their sole artistic material that the complexity

of the feminine stratum of subjectivity is most pronounced. To engage it in more detail, I will analyse in some depth the related yet more thoroughly developed theorising of the feminine in Ettinger's notion of the matrix.

The notion of the matrix was not unknown in psychoanalytical literature before it was taken up by Ettinger to enable her highly specific theoretical intervention, her complex re/marking of the feminine stratum of subjectivity. It was a notion employed for example by S. H. Foulkes, psychoanalyst and founder of group analysis, a specific form of psychotherapy based on insights from psychoanalysis but shifting the focus from an individual to a group, and to an individual's liberation and integration within a group. In S. H. Foulkes' work, matrix was conceived as a non-reductive notion that could emphasise the principle of connectedness within a group understood as a complex system of relations. For Ettinger as well matrix defines the stratum of subjectivity by means of which subject is theorised in its links to another subjectivity, however, in her theorising this link is no longer posited as intersubjective but rather as trans-subjective and sub-subjective, as a web of relations-without-relating and transformative links and not as relations to already formed objects and subjects. Ettinger's writing on the matrixial stratum of subjectivity thus no longer places the idea of a group as opposite to that of an individual, and instead argues severality to be the proper function of the notion of the subject as such, alongside and in its complex relation with the phallic subject. Through Ettinger's theorising of the matrix and the complexity of matrixial relations-without-relating, feminine is no longer understood as the Lacanian 'zone of mystery', as the inaccessible Other/Thing, forever outside the order of signification which is arguably always formed through phallic operations, with their emphasis on the schism and separation accompanying one's entry into the symbolic order, order of the law of the signifier. Matrixial subjectivity marks another and equally

complex layer of subjectivity, not an inaccessible or abject Other/Thing but an area of difference characterised by its own specific processes and functions.

Matrix is reiterated throughout Ettinger's writings as a phrase of perpetual becoming, a signifier and a riddle, an element of rhythmic repetition and key theoretical term, a 'Trojan horse' introduced into the phallic order in order to "map" the metramorphosis⁷ – where metramorphosis is Ettinger's term for a web of potentiality, of the links and passageways between seemingly separate subjects, and marks a psychic position where knowledge is transformative and not yet frozen into objects. The subjectivity of which she speaks is likewise a volatile notion, 'both diffracted and assembled, both dispersed and partial, and part of an alliance'.⁸ Matrix is a living borderspace, always and inevitably changing and confusing the notions of the inside and the outside, a permeable borderline where subjectivity is in its emergent state of encounter.

The concept of the state of encounter engaged by Ettinger is significant for further approaching possible strategies for activating such a living borderspace in performance. The notion of the state of encounter is known in psychoanalytic literature notably through the work of Piera Aulagnier, whose theory bridges object relations psychoanalysis and the work of Lacan. Aulagnier is most renowned for her analyses of severe psychotic states, which she based on the children's early experiences in the pre-verbal stages of development. Her research into how psychotic states relate to the representational function of the psyche is significant both in the context of mapping feminine subjectivity and in approaching the desymbolisation resulting from traumatic experience and the consequences such desymbolisation has for creative work wishing to address trauma.

⁷ Cf.: Lone Bertelsen's use of the notion of the matrixial refrain in Lone Bertelsen, 'Matrixial Refrains', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2004, vol. 21, no. 1: 121–147.

⁸ Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 91.

Before Ettinger's theoretical intervention, Aulagnier was already one of the object relations psychoanalysts who had proposed that '[p]syche and the world meet and are born with one another and by one another; and they are the result of a state of encounter that is coextensive with the state of living being',⁹ a position close to phenomenological thinking, significant for theorising subject-object relations and moving the focus from the Lacanian insistence on the symbolic distance of consciousness in its relating to the body and to its wider environment. What Ettinger has brought into the psychoanalytical discourse is that before and together with all else, this encounter is matrixial, literally an encounter in and of the womb.¹⁰ Ettinger warns that matrix (Latin for 'womb') should not be identified with the uterus, just as phallus is not to be identified with the penis. However, she does not disavow the corpo-reality of female sexual difference which links the notion of the matrix to the female body while its cultural aspects make it a basis for the 'human potentiality for a shareability and a co-poïesis'.¹¹

For Aulagnier, however, the accent is not yet on this most intimate, and potentially most traumatising psychic and physiological encounter. Aulagnier focuses on how the psyche from its earliest stages relates to the world it encounters through the activity of representation, which she theorises as 'the psychical equivalent of the work of metabolism proper to organic activity'.¹² The necessary transformation of the elements of the world¹³ in such a process suggests a kind of psychic metabolic homogenisation of

⁹ Piera Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹² Piera Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation*, p. 3. Aulagnier describes the metabolic process as a 'function by which an element heterogeneous to the cellular structure is rejected or [...] transformed into a raw material that becomes homogenous with it' (Piera Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation*, p. 3).

¹³ Aulagnier speaks of them as elements of information and, following on Aulagnier but avoiding this haste towards the 'violence of interpretation' suggested in the notion of 'information', Ettinger will speak of them as archaic sensorial events. Cf. Bracha Ettinger, 'Metramorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace', p. 131.

the outside to the inside so that:

[a]s long as one remains in the register of the I [...] this setting up of relation does not entail the acquisition of any knowledge of the object in itself [...] but the ability to establish between the elements an order of causality that makes the existence of the world and the relation present between these elements intelligible to the I.¹⁴

Thus, in the register of the I, representation becomes synonymous with interpretation and interpretation synonymous with violence; violence as the necessary imposition of the 'host' structure in a process of psychological grinding down of heterogeneous information into a raw material that can be metabolised by the psyche.

Aulagnier's metabolic metaphor of representation approaches another, this time quite literally violent, theoretical term engaged by Rolnik and linked to the cultural strategies of resistance to the first waves of global modernity – the notion of cultural anthropophagy developed in Brazil by the avant-garde artists and theorists of the early twentieth century.¹⁵ Anthropophagy was the Western anthropological term linked to an indigenous ceremony of devouring the enemies captured in battle through a long ritual process that lasted for many months, or even years, which became infamous as an example of cannibalism practiced by the indigenous groups that once lived across the territories where Brazil was later formed by the Portuguese colonisers. By shifting that notion into the sphere of culture, the Brazilian avant-garde artists appropriated the colonial interpretation of the cannibalistic primitive to affirm 'the critical and irreverent devouring of an otherness that is always multiple and variable'¹⁶ and that was typical of Brazilian culture since its very foundation. Their appropriative strategy, praised for making strikingly visible and upsetting the normalisation of difference typical of the colonial project, in the context of Aulagnier's analysis of the representational function of the psyche shows its negative side as a strategy

¹⁴ Piera Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Exemplified most importantly by Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagite Manifesto* of 1928 and later reworked in Hélio Oiticica's artwork and writings about modernism in the 1970s.

¹⁶ Suely Rolnik, 'Avoiding False Problems'.

still bound to the phallic logic of the coloniser, doubling the devouring of otherness, where the psychological metabolisation of a threatening influence of an overpowering other only reverses the terms of the incorporation while remaining locked in the same consuming structure of the phallic representational logic. Rolnik likewise warns of the ease with which the potential for cultural anthropophagy as an emancipatory project can turn into simply a different form of subjection and into a reactive and reactionary movement, pointing to the way it has been mobilised in its basest form by neoliberalism in contemporary Brazil.

The notion of matrixial relating poses a challenge to the binary of incorporation versus exclusion implicated so strikingly in cultural anthropophagy and inevitably present in representational relational models, inviting us to identify and theorise points of contact between the psyche and the world – or between dominant and marginal cultures – that allow for traces of such heterogeneous information of an ‘outside’ to seep through that ‘raw material’ that can be made accessible to our signifying systems, to the languages and structures of our psyches and our cultures.

To describe this ‘raw psychic material’ Aulagnier introduced the concept of the pictogram, a specific form of psychic representation produced by a primal process and preceding Freud’s primary process represented by an unconscious phantasy, and secondary process, the self-representation of the subject’s I that gives meaning to our personal histories. Aulagnier sees pictogram as both ‘a representation of the affect and an affect of representation’ and as such of all the psychic spaces it is the one that remains closest to the body.¹⁷ Ettinger importantly notes that the fact that Aulagnier’s representations – pictograms, which she describes as archaic sensorial events, are psychic events means that they are ‘not only used by the body for its survival but are also invested with libido, or affected’.¹⁸ In Ettinger’s theory, however, there is another important discursive step to be

¹⁷ Piera Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation*, p. 36.

¹⁸ Bracha Ettinger, ‘Metramorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace’, p. 131.

made here, for it is only by 'elementary phallic operations' that the most archaic traces of this encounter between the psyche and the world are already representational. What Ettinger proposes is to expand the spaces of ontogenetic 'memory' – pictogram, phantasy (which she describes as figurative *mise-en-scène*, suggesting the psychic function of phantasy as the 'proper' locus of theatre) and idea / statement – to include matrixial ontogenesis, a way in which, 'beyond the symbolic and beyond representation, living systems "make sense" which is inseparable from the history of their transformation, and the transformation itself is inseparable from this making sense.'¹⁹ It is the possibility of addressing this affected and affective materiality of matrixial 'memory' in performance that most interests me in this chapter.

Ettinger is inspired in this theorising of the matrixial ontogenesis by cognitive sciences and by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's notion of autopoiesis, which affirms that in living systems meaning and memory can be conceptualised beyond and before their registration as signs and symbols, as the material history of structural couplings of their autopoietic ontogenesis. However, Maturana and Varela's model is predicated on living systems understood as autonomous and operationally closed, relating in psychoanalytical terms to the self which rejects the non-self, or to culture as a self-enclosed, autonomous symbolic structure which similarly rejects or incorporates its other, the foreigner, the immigrant, another culture's symbolic configurations. What matrixial ontogenesis thus suggests is that the 'state of encounter' between marginal and dominant cultures as well can be traced at a deeply significant level as a complex and constant re-attuning and webbing, not necessarily bound to the notions of incorporation versus exclusion – challenged yet reiterated through cultural anthropophagy – but as profound and ongoing material transformations of cultures as living systems which can have no

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 134.

meaning outside of the mutually transformative processes in which they are continually engaged and where significant cultural interventions can take place.

As with Rolnik's notion of the resonant body, Ettinger moves beyond the representational model through the notions of co-poïesis and of metramorphosis, which render the coextensiveness of the psyche and the world permeable, allowing for traces of sub-symbolic matrixial meanings to seep into the symbolic, interweaving it with 'a non-conscious transsubjectivity composed of trauma and jouissance'.²⁰ In metramorphosis, 'a continuous attuning goes on between the co-emerging I(s) and non-I(s) [...] No longer a self-sufficient activity, this process is a "co-poïesis". It marks the transgression of a borderlink, its transmissibility, its conductivity'.²¹

Metramorphosis is the thread through which sub-symbolic meanings remain present in the symbolic order and trigger changes in it. While metramorphosis ascertains the inevitable transmissibility and conductivity of subjectivity (and culture), it does not ward off the destabilising potential of such 'severality'. In the matrixial stratum:

the subject co-emerges with an event-other co-pulsating in co-poïesis, she is constituted not in relation to an other-as-an-object but in relation to the trembling experience of oscillation between I and non-I in the encounter.²²

The very notion of the phallic, 'fortified' self is obviously abandoned here, or rather expanded and merged with its object, as in the use of another neologism of selfobject, i.e. in invoking the 'between-presence-and-absence status of the matrixial partial-subject and selfobject'.²³ It is important to note again that matrix is a stratum of subjectivity, not a replacement or a complementary side of the phallic subject. Matrixial prism alternates with the phallic one, and participates side by side with it in the Real, the Imaginary and

²⁰ Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 91.

²¹ Idem, 'Metramorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace', p. 129.

²² Idem, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 91.

²³ Ibid., p. 92, note 1.

the Symbolic.²⁴ Nonetheless, it does bring with it what Ettinger calls a surplus of fragility, again evocative of Rolnik's insistence on the vulnerability of the resonant body. The affective-emotive 'swerving' and the impossibility of not-sharing which are constitutive of the matrixial stratum of subjectivity are 'profoundly fragilizing'.²⁵ While discarded and warded off exactly for its fragilising potential which brings instability to the subject, the matrixial stratum cannot be severed, and the strategies for stabilising the subject as separate and fortified against it will inevitably lead to an increase in the very fragility such strategies are attempting to circumvent, a fragility now perceived as a threat originating outside the subject.

The effort of articulating a theoretical (and as I will increasingly try to in this chapter, a performance) language that addresses matrixial subjectivity is thus above all a significant facet of an ethical project, of an ethics and politics of relationality that posits severality as the proper function of the notion of the subject as such, an ethics of the affirmation of life that expresses 'the signs of the presence of the other in our resonant body',²⁶ as Rolnik would argue; of allowing for the presence of that other to render us fragile and vulnerable without aggravating defensiveness or provoking attack. It is an ethics that extends the Levinasian proposition of the infinite responsibility for the Other into the space of the maternal which for Levinas as well marks the ultimate ethical gesture. However, it does that without following Levinas in designating the feminine via the maternal as absolute substitution, as necessarily self-sacrificial. It is an effort to reclaim the feminine in the sphere of ethics and politics not as that which is at their point of origin yet entirely substituted by them, but as a lasting ethical and political potential for shareability

²⁴ Cf. Bracha Ettinger, 'Metramorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace', pp. 152–153.

²⁵ Idem, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 77.

²⁶ Suely Rolnik, 'The Geopolitics of Pimping'.

– a space of resonance as theorised by Rolnik, or the almost-Other matrixial subjectivity, the web of links existing in a trans-subjective borderspace, as theorised by Ettinger.

The particular aspect of relationality that the matrixial presents us with is not an abstract, ideal, sublime ethics of motherhood and feminine sensitivity, it is a messy, complex web of relations in which we are all entangled and by which we can never be fully constituted as self-sufficient, either as individuals or as societies. Its relationality is a movement to our shared borderspaces that mark us as partial-subjectivities, an affectively highly charged and not easily articulated space complicating ideas of sociality and socially engaged art.

The matrixial offers ‘microscopic’ access to a significant aspect of Nancy’s theorising of the inoperative community, which has been highly influential in the recent writing on community-based art.²⁷ Art with-in community forms a significant aspect of my project, although my thesis focuses on performative engagements that could ‘work’ in the context of broken communities where ‘community-based’ becomes an especially contestable notion and often a logistic impossibility (as in the case of exiled communities or communities in conflict). Nancy’s inoperative community offers a possibility to theorise community not through an effort to (re)instate a totality but through an absence, above all through the absence of a totalising myth, but also a far more constitutive absence. The inoperative community marks an aspiration to totality, however, that aspiration is interrupted by a rupture that ‘defines a *relation* to the absolute [...] [so that] Being “itself” comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, and if you will – in any case this is what [Nancy is] trying to argue – as *community*.’²⁸ That constitutive absence is the unmarked place of the feminine, the *rapture* of matrixial subjectivity which is simultaneous with that absence,

²⁷ Notably in Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004.

²⁸ Jean Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, et al.. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 6.

which is the map of its movement as trauma and *jouissance*. The viciousness of violence perpetrated against women in conflicts driven by totalising 'communal' myths is the sure mark of just how charged a space this absence is, and how significant it is to conceive of a community which is not constituted through the drive to 'fill' it with sacrifice and any myth of totality, with their dangerous implications of fascism.

While the matrixial marks the sphere in which subjectivity approaches trauma and *jouissance* in the Real, Nancy's inoperative community similarly posits rupture and ecstasy as movements that form a community approaching what Massumi would perhaps term its virtual vanishing point, its own impossible 'essence', a community made up of singularities, not of individuals or of fully defined groups but of ecstatic and mortal beings among whom 'the passion of and for community propagates itself, unworked, appealing, demanding to pass beyond every limit and every fulfillment enclosed in the form of an individual. It is thus not an absence, but a movement [...]'.²⁹ Matrixial then is the rhythm which enables this movement not to frieze itself into an arresting totality, which engages this 'passion of and for community' so that it would not turn itself into a warring frenzy against difference, which it cannot and should never substitute.

It could be argued that artists have for a long time been creating occasions to engage with such an inoperative community, especially in the growing tendency to move their work out of the galleries and theatre buildings bound by institutional rules and more or less rigid styles and repertoires, creating provisional gatherings of people around and for the specific purpose of witnessing an art project or a theatrical performance. Moreover, as Miwon Kwon notes,³⁰ site specificity, which has for a long time been associated with such projects, is now increasingly being exchanged for issue-specificity, and audience- or community-specificity, assuming a certain commonality of identities 'based on (experience

²⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

³⁰ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another*, p. 112.

of) ethnicity, gender, geographical proximity, political affiliation, religious beliefs, social and economical classes, etc.’³¹ Nancy’s inoperative community, and the complexity of relating in the feminine, theorised through the matrixial and the notion of wit(h)nessing, show how, while each of these contextualising gestures may be potential occasions for art to unlock such a re-imagined politics of an inoperative community, they do not guarantee this in any way. Neither content nor context can in and of themselves guarantee art’s political and ethical efficacy.

Art at its best will always create ‘highly authored situations that fuse [...] reality with carefully calculated artifice’, however much the subject of that authorship may be challenged and questioned in the work. Art operates best on the level of potentiality, by striving ‘not only to make sense but to make semblance, to make the making-sense experientially appear’,³² by freeing a certain potential in situations, suspending and shifting particular frameworks within which sites, communities and bodies operate. Thus, without undermining my own focus in the thesis on the works that engage with highly specific histories and contexts linked to political violence, forced migrations, (trans)nationalism and social exclusion, it is in identifying how these works ‘make the making-sense experientially appear’ that the artistic agency and efficacy of each of the projects shows itself, and not only in the content and the context of these works, however significant these may be. Rolnik similarly argues how

[a]rt has a special vocation to carry out such a task [of exposing the pimping of the creative force], to the extent that by bringing the mutations of sensibility into the realm of the visible and the speakable, it can unravel the cartography of the present, liberating life at its points of interruption and releasing its power of germination – a task utterly distinct from and irreducible to macropolitical activism.³³

³¹ Ibid.

³² Brian Massumi, ‘The Thinking-Feeling of what Happens’, p. 15.

³³ Suely Rolnik, ‘The Geopolitics of Pimping’.

And while on the macropolitical level, the task of politics may remain importantly linked to struggles of recognition, although that in itself is a contestable and contested proposition, in the arts '[f]ailure is the measure of what has been recognized'³⁴ and nowhere more so than in the works dealing with histories of trauma.

Matrixial Encounters in Performance

To shift this theorising of the feminine through the notion of the matrix to specific modes of relating in performance, I will first note the work of Michael Kirby, who introduced an apparently very different idea of the matrix in the context of theatre and performance. In his 1965 anthology of happenings,³⁵ Kirby was the first to formulate a consistent theory of happenings to help distinguish them from other outwardly similar forms of art and theatre. In Kirby's theory of happenings, the notion of the matrix is central – Kirby describes matrix as the key element of acting, 'an intentionally created and consciously possessed world',³⁶ a 'manufactured reality'³⁷ composed of (imaginary) time or / and place and (always) of character. Kirby locates happenings firmly within the lineage of theatre, however, he introduces 'non-matrixed' performing as their central characteristic. Non-matrixed characteristics of the dramaturgical structure and performance style in happenings included alogical elements that disrupted the 'natural' impulse to build narrative frameworks around what was experienced, and that diverted tendencies to

³⁴ Ettinger, cited by Judith Butler in 'Bracha's Eurydice', foreword to *Matrixial Borderspace: Essays by Bracha Ettinger*, Brian Massumi (ed.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. viii.

³⁵ Michael Kirby, *Happenings. An Illustrated Anthology*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965. The term happening itself was coined by Allan Kaprow earlier, sometime in 1957, to describe the new art form he was developing; 'Something to take place: a happening', as read the caption for an (unperformed) scenario of some of Kaprow's students in the Winter 1958 issue of *Anthologist*, undergraduate literary magazine at Rutgers University where Kaprow taught (Cf. Dick Higgins, 'The Origin of Happening', *American Speech*, Autumn – Winter 1976, vol. 51, no. 3/4: 268–271).

³⁶ Michael Kirby, *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

reference the 'happening' to anything outside the concrete event; task-oriented movement did away with the matrix of character; and a careful dismantling of imaginary settings made the stage structure compartmentalised so that it could no longer feed into any tendency to create an overall meaning.³⁸

Kirby's binary of matrixed and non-matrixed performing was part of a conscious 'rejection of theatre' by the early performance artists and theorists in the 1960s³⁹ but it is the fluid borders of this apparent binary that have since provided a far more fertile ground for experimentation. It is in these 'borderlinking' experiments that I locate Ettinger's notion of the matrixial; instead of a self-contained matrix of the actor's craft much of which involves complex training to ensure that the borders of the imaginary matrix of space / time / character are well-preserved, the 'between-presence-and-absence status of the matrixial partial-subject' in performance may actually activate the edges of this structure and start 'shaking' them without fear of the entire structure collapsing; for, as Ettinger reminds us, the matrixial borderspace is not introduced as a notion to *shatter* the subject but to suggest that outside the borders of the more or less contained phallic subject there is not just the psychosis – although the rigidity of our sense/s of self may easily induce it in what is after all a profound instability for any identity-bound subject – but a different sense of being-with and of wit(h)nessing, of sharing.

Ettinger continually reminds her reader that the matrixial is not the space of a happy communal gathering but a space where traumas are re-defused and thus also a highly charged and potentially dangerous space. So, choosing to see happenings in their openness to life as inevitably open to this fragilising potential of the matrixial, I am interested in something of a possible failure of nonmatrixed performance, which Kirby describes as

³⁸ Cf. Marvin A. Carlson, *Performance: a Critical Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge 2004 (1996), pp. 104–106.

³⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 141–142.

one of executing a 'generally simple and undemanding act', where the performer 'merely embodies and makes concrete the idea [of the artist]'.⁴⁰

Kirby's effort to reach a clear theoretical position that would distinguish happenings from a proliferation of experimental forms of theatre and art during that same era should not be seen to suggest that happenings were just a formal experiment. In his 1983 essay 'The Real Experiment', for example, Allan Kaprow explicitly states a purpose to his lifelike art as therapeutic: 'The purpose of lifelike art was therapeutic: to reintegrate the piecemeal reality we take for granted. Not just intellectually, but directly, as experience – in this moment, in this house, at this kitchen sink [...]'⁴¹ (at this table, in this room, on this page).

In the same list stating the eight main characteristics of his lifelike art, Kaprow also writes: 'Lifelike art did not merely label life as art. It was continuous with that life, inflecting, probing, testing, and even suffering it, but always attentively. (That's the source of its humor; when you look closely at your suffering, it can be pretty funny...)'⁴² Perhaps it is our separateness from the place of suffering that is both provoking a growing interest in trauma studies and making us see it as a gravely serious affair whereas in the most terrific circumstances laughter is their undoing and may literally save lives.

And to problematise any such proposed simplicity of action further, here is how Kaprow referred to the idea of non-matrixed action in happenings in one of the texts on his 'lifelike art':

Doing life, consciously, was a compelling notion to me.

When you do life consciously, however, life becomes pretty strange – paying attention changes the thing attended to – so the Happenings were not nearly as lifelike as I had supposed they might be. But I learned something about life and "life".⁴³

⁴⁰ Michael Kirby, *Happenings*, p. 17.

⁴¹ Allan Kaprow, 'The Real Experiment' in *Ibid.*, pp. 205–206.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Allan Kaprow, 'Performing Life' (1979), in *Allan Kaprow Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*,

What this may involve in practical terms is illustrated in another of Kaprow's texts on lifelike art, written as a comment to a proposed 'simple' performance / exercise of conscious breathing, involving an amplified sound of breath and a marked trace of hot air produced by breathing on an icy mirror:

Breathing as an abstract idea is unexceptionable; like integrity it is desirable. And formally manipulating verbal exercises on it might even provoke mild curiosity. But breathing as a real and particular event can be an awkward and painful business. [...] I suspect that the innocent playfulness and poetic naturism of the prescriptions in this piece could gradually become perverse and disturbing for participants, who might gain release from its deadpan literalness only by accepting a temporary alienation of the breath from self.⁴⁴

This is what I 'take' from this theorising of happenings as a new form of being-in-performance, not its ideological project of undoing of the matrix of the 'invented world' of character but the opening of that world up as a 'matrixial borderspace' that we could argue happenings made possible for the performer as an artist in her own right. And while I do not mean to suggest that happenings were onto some sort of reworking of trauma, the attention given in happenings to the particular workings of life in its minutest, simplest actions, is precisely what I had in mind when I suggested in the first chapter of the thesis that certain modes of working in performance have moved away from the proximity of the habitual and towards the exactness of the traumatic. And this is no 'simple' matter.

The splitting of the breath from self which threatens the subject when breath is manipulated and which, Kaprow suggests, the subject can paradoxically overcome by an act of acceptance of this alienation of breath as the Other of the self, sets the 'stage' for an examination of trauma that I will engage with now through analyses of two examples of contemporary live art and performance practices that show how such a shift in focus onto the miniature relations between body-in-performance and in-life opens up a whole

Jeff Kelley (ed.), Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 2003 (1993), p. 195.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

different mode of being and performing for artists who work with their bodies voided of any easily discernable narrative context.

anchor series: Telling Surfaces

anchor series is a series of site-specific impromptu interventions and durational performances that the artist Eve Dent has been making since 2003 as part of her ongoing exploration of the boundaries between the physical body and the body of a site. Dent's work, now extending for almost a decade, is a persistent yet often hardly visible string of 'ab-presences', or 'pres-absences', to use another of Ettinger's matrixial terms.⁴⁵ The audiences will often be offered only a glimpse of the artist's body entangled with-in site: a toe, a dangling leg, her feet, fingers gripping a door, outstretched arms; at other times, her presence is more visible and the intervention with-in site more pronounced: both legs below the knees as she descends down a flue of a chimney and rests there, the entire naked body curled within a hole in a crumbling brick wall, a held-out hand or both legs thrust through a wall, a headless body, smartly dressed and resting care-fully on a gallery floor with head disappearing into the floorboards, always slipping in-and-out of different layers of built space but with no visible disturbance to the site as the seams between the body of the site and the artist's body are always carefully joined back together. But these are only recorded traces of what are at times very long durations that allow for the working of a kind of 'sympathetic magic' that 'grows' a complex hybrid web between flesh and architecture. Ettinger's language of the matrixial feels pertinent again, for this is not a case of symbiosis, there is never a blending between these two bodies that would require a third as a witness, but a continual swerving, borderlinking, oscillation.

⁴⁵ Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', pp. 91–92, note 1.

Although always surprising, these encounters between the artist and site are neither a sudden occurrence nor an invasion. The artist is calm, undisturbed, her ab-presence hardly noticeable but insistent over time. She is inscribing her body in the recesses, fitting it into the nooks and crannies, in the internal holes or cavities with-in and with-out architecture and landscape and, increasingly, she is journeying through site, often unknown to her until she arrives there a day before the performance. This is also a superficial encounter, an encounter of two surfaces with no time for complex relations to become established between the artist and site. The intensity of the experience of Dent's performances is thus all the more surprising. In a certain sense, in this encounter the artist is in no greater possession of her body than she is in possession of the site. Neither is she abandoning her subjectivity to be devoured by the site, although Dent states a consistent influence of Roger Caillois' elaboration of insect mimicry and its links to a kind of spatial psychosis that thrusts the subject out of the boundaries of her body and into space.⁴⁶ The relation itself is no longer one of 'meeting-qua-possession'⁴⁷ but of increasingly porous boundaries and what we can now perhaps recognise through the matrixial dimension as an awareness of the Event / Encounter in which subjectivity is 'both diffracted and assembled, both dispersed and partial, and part of an alliance.'⁴⁸ While the notion of the spatial psychosis emphasises the breakage of the boundary of skin and a sense of de-personalisation and assimilation, the artist's hovering between the visible and the in-side of the spatial envelope is consistently ambiguous and her undisturbed demeanour slowly

⁴⁶ In Roger Caillois' essay 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', first published in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1935. In English, published in *October*, Winter 1984, no. 31: 17–32. Caillois sees mimicry as a confusion between the insect and its surrounding of no survival value, and links it to the undermining of what he terms 'the feeling of personality, [...] the organism's sense of distinction from its surroundings'.

⁴⁷ Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 91.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

and unnoticeably dissipates interest, it carefully disperses the audiences' spectating gaze, with its short-span, in-tense attention and all-too-easily overbearing expectation.

There is a sense of playfulness to Dent's work, a child-like excitement of playing hide-and-seek with an audience, however this playfulness is never severed from the uncanny, frightening aspect of a child's excitement with the game. After the initial confusion, dis-orienting and re-orienting us in space as all the dominant points of focus with-in it are discarded and we finally locate glimpses or the whole of the artist's body, often in seemingly marginal positions in space, we will inevitably fail to find what has been hidden, just as we will inevitably fail not to stumble upon it. The question of where the artist is, of where the art is, thus becomes interwoven with the question of where I am, of where 'I' is, and dis-locates itself from any stable point in space. What remains is a sense of 'becoming space' that Caillois speaks about in his article, a wavering and a stilling of attention, but also a sense of 'becoming time' that comes with stillness but is not confined by it and resonates with Seremetakis' notion of the still-act: 'Stillness is the moment when the buried, the discarded and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust.'⁴⁹ The artist sees her body as a medium through which the poetic life of a site is expressed, but this is again a co-poïesis, in which the body and site are in a constant process of co-emergence and encounter.

In her *anchor series* particularly, the artist states another inspiration in the figure of the anchoress, a medieval female hermit who would choose to be shut up for life inside a small room attached to a church:

This act of living entombment and incarceration I find both deeply fascinating and disturbing, mirroring my artistic concerns: the housing of the body in site; the rite of disappearance and loss; a vision of the sanctity and strangeness of bricks and mortar, anchored and mediated through

⁴⁹ Nadia Seremetakis (ed.), *The Senses Still*, p. 12.

a human presence, animating the hidden poetic life of a space. “It is for this reason that an anchoress is called an anchoress, and anchored under a church like an anchor under the side of a ship, to hold it, so that the waves and storms do not pitch it over” (Ancrene Wisse).⁵⁰

Naked Girl Falling Down The Stairs

‘Naked Girl Falling Down The Stairs’ is the title of The Cramps’ 1994 song from their *Flamejob* album, a likely inspiration for Kira O’Reilly’s *Stair Falling* performance. Performed only months after the death of The Cramps’ founding member and lead singer Lux Interior, O’Reilly’s deceptively simple piece consisted of ‘just’ that, a ‘naked girl falling down the stairs’ of a museum / gallery, performing the action of ‘*falling* down the stairs backwards over four hours, repeated daily for 17 days / one descent per day’ – as the artist pithily put it on her blog.⁵¹

The formal simplicity of the piece allowed the artist to focus fully on the *falling*. This potentially highly dangerous idea was unlocked through carefully controlled, extremely slow movement, which unfolded both the funniest and the most frightening idea for a meditation in motion: a naked backwards ‘fall’ down the Whitworth Gallery’s exquisite Victorian staircase. The notes on Kira O’Reilly’s blog indicate that her intricate backwards tumble was aided by the practice of *sKu-mNyé*, psychophysical movement exercises of the Tibetan Buddhist *Aro* Tradition that the artist has been studying extensively,⁵² as well as the asana and pranayama practices of the Iyengar Yoga, the highly precise skeletal and muscular alignments and breathing techniques that allowed the artist’s body to continually move through an ongoing set of inversions, postures that made it possible to control what

⁵⁰ Eve Dent, artist statement, 2006.

⁵¹ Kira O’Reilly, ‘Notes for the Whitworth Gallery staircase (north)’, blog entry, May 2009, online access, available HTTP: <<http://www.kiraoreilly.com/blog/p=216>>.

⁵² Cf. Franc Chamberlain, ‘Playing with Post-Secular Performance: Julia Lee Barclay, Ansuman Biswas, Traci Kelly, and Kira O’Reilly in conversation with Franc Chamberlain’, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 2009, 31 (1), pp. 54–67 (59).

would otherwise have been a potentially lethal fall down the tall, curved staircase. The progress of her downward journey was additionally and critically held in check by her soft-leather gloved hands, one of which was always able to grasp the staircase banister rails during the four-hour descent.

Mounting the steps I see, up on the turning of the staircase, light pouring through the three wings of a very tall oriel window onto high-sheen white walls and dark stone stairs, and onto strangely shaped clusterings of people, white-clad like me, sitting or standing, observing quietly. As I reach closer I realise that the people are in fact moving slowly back down the steps following the artist's deliberate and very slow backwards tumble. They remain several steps below to allow enough space for the artist; a few of us moving closer, some people sitting on stairs, some laying down, staying long; someone always seems to be there with the artist as she continues her highly focused, strenuous upside down descent.

As I stop and lean against the wall close to the artist, the most striking effects of her presence that I immediately have to negotiate are her nakedness and the complexity of her inverted position in relation to my standing body. Hers is a body exposed, given-to-be-seen, mine doubly clothed, with a white lab coat worn over my clothes. My body upright, hers apparently abandoned to the force of gravity. This is not an ordinary kind of nakedness either; it is the nude in its root meaning of exposure, with each line, each hair on this clearly sexed body starkly visible. And yet it is this very visibility, this overexposure that overwhelms my gaze, dissolves it into a myriad of pieces, absorbing details of skin texture, the different shades and shapes of each small segment of skin and hair. The initial opposition of the upright and the horizontal planes dissolves as well as her movement proves equally uncontainable. Her entire naked body is at work, exertion clearly showing in the tensing of the muscles and the stretching of the skin, her head continually and slowly turning, pressing sideways and then downward, face reddening and tensing as the gravity makes the blood flush through to the

head, then relaxing slightly once again. The muscles along the spine seem especially exerted as her legs continually reach up to an almost vertical position and then feel their way down over the head, yet she allows each leg to find its way softly, carefully following the movement of the body's skeletal frame.

While the artist negotiates the many minute shifts down each stone step, her eyes are wide open but although she is fully aware of her audience these eyes appear as exposed as her body is, and her negotiations seem to occupy an altogether different kind of awareness. I will later read of the notion of 'focusing in space' in the sKu-mNyé practice, what Kira O'Reilly elsewhere describes as 'peering, a gazing and glazing of the eyes onto planes of nothingthereness, onto thin air'⁵³ and the effect this relaxing of her gaze has on me as an audience member / wit(h)ness brings about a similar kind of blurring and dis-attachment, a softening of vision that awakens other senses, and relaxes and embeds my body in a suddenly almost tangible air, expands it onto the architecture of the steps with their cool dark stone, so much so that I can feel its taste in my mouth although it cannot be their stone I sense as I have never tasted it; this is another stone emerged from memory, a warm stone step of another building, or a rock licked on a beach somewhere as a child perhaps.

The sense of slowness and lack of tension set the rhythm of this shared journey. As the artist's body continually alternates between rest and motion throughout her complex movement, the piece opens itself up as a dance form in its own right, its vocabulary continually made (and) undone through the hours of complex negotiation of the anatomy of the artist's body and the anatomy of the architecture that O'Reilly engages with in the work. Her entire body is performing a skeletal dance of sorts, each posture establishing the middle ground between two frames, that of the human animal and its shifting contours with no straight lines; and that of the architectural structure, with continual, parallel lines of the many steps softened by the long, curved shape of the staircase itself. It is a sense of movement that does not invite comparison, an idiosyncratic

⁵³ Kira O'Reilly 'Brief notes on peering, gazing and scrying', blog entry, June 2010, access online, available HTTP: <<http://www.kiraoreilly.com/blog/archives/421>>.

vocabulary of the artist who 'has begun to make "dances", with her 41 year old non-dance trained body, attempting to totter at the edge of some kind of capacity and some unnamed ground'.⁵⁴

I look at my scribbled notes: *'you are in this body, a-maze-d'. A maze of flesh-in-motion, a water-filled, fluid body expanding over the slippery edges of the steps, and a fluid kind of consciousness in which I sense, or only interpret it as such, a slow deliberate act of abandon, astonished and diving into a very different kind of awareness. And the space itself invites this upside down body, somehow it seems this is how it should always have been with bodies and sets of steps that move between different levels of height: as if architecture was materialising the imagined journey of this inverted consciousness. There is another significant inversion being made here, this is not the struggle to the top but a negotiation of gravity in the down-fall, undoing the jinx of that doomed word 'downfall', 'This will be your downfall', he says; 'yes, indeed, and what a jolly roll it shall be', goes the answer it seems. But this imagined dialogue of a gendered opposition is only a vaguely present aspect within the dense mesh of time of her 'fall'.*

The writing seems to summon the artist's presence so vividly but I am surprised and rather suspicious of the details that emerge in my delayed description. How much of it has already shifted in my memory, joined with other dances, other movements, remembered, left unsaid and now gathering hastily around the vortex of her fall? I let them hover there, or disappear entirely, drawn in by its strong pull. Having made that blind journey back in time, there was nothing to meet me there before I could build a tenuous sort of staircase for my memory so that her body finally emerged slowly against the illusion of solid shapes of architecture. So I return to what I think I know, holding on to what can be made out from the documentation, and the hard facts of the almost impossibly narrow surfaces down which Kira O'Reilly performed her tumbling dance: 'riser: 16 cm (6 1/2 inches), tread: 31.75 cm (12 1/2 inches)', as noted by the curator Mary Griffiths.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Idem, artist's statement.

⁵⁵ Idem, 'Notes for the Whitworth Gallery staircase (north)'.

Yet the piece again refuses to settle in what prove to be equally fictional spaces. The apparent solidity of sizes is now just a mark on the measuring tape resting on my desk as I write, and the pixilated outline of her body on the staircase a mark in different media. The work occupies another kind of space, and another sense of time. It is 'an event unremembered', as Ettinger writes:

If the work of art can only be born into and out of amnesia, the work of the artist is a working-through and bringing into being of that which cannot be remembered. An event unremembered – yet that cannot be forgotten – is located in a transsubjective borderspace.⁵⁶

This borderspace does not belong to my memory any more than it belongs to the artist. It marks a space of non-belonging, and a time not unlike the 'topographical time' of which O'Reilly writes in another context, comparing the work with time in her art with biotechnology, which 'allows metric, linear time to collapse into an unexpected topography of proximities and distances where other connections are made and events pulled backwards and forwards in the same time at the same place'.⁵⁷ I intuit such concerns in her *Stair Falling* piece although it does not appear to involve any sophisticated manipulation of the biological processes. Yet in the enduring suspension of the flow of movement, in her examination of the acute pull of gravity, in the practice of sustainment and of total exposure to the gaze, and in her own non-attached, soft vision that disorientates and quietens the conceptual mind, the artist's own body's biological processes are 'manipulated' over a markedly long period and the framework of linear space and time on which we are conditioned to fully depend for our sense of stability and against which we negotiate our movements is collapsed into another unexpected, dense and affected topography, and

⁵⁶ Bracha Ettinger, 'Transcriptum: Memory Tracing in/for/with the Other', in *Matrixial Borderspace: Essays by Bracha Ettinger*, Brian Massumi (ed.), Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, pp. 162–172 (163).

⁵⁷ Kira O'Reilly, 'Marsyas – beside myself', in Jens Hauser (ed.), *sk-interfaces: Exploding Borders – Creating Membranes in Art, Technology and Society*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp. 96–101 (100).

tested to the extreme. As a form of dance, it approaches the movement of 'biological' recollection, working with an ontogenetic kind of memory, with a way in which, 'beyond the symbolic and beyond representation, living systems "make sense" which is inseparable from the history of their transformation, and the transformation itself is inseparable from this making sense'.⁵⁸

The notion of art working with what Lacanian psychoanalytical language terms as the Real is profoundly implicated in such transformation. The Real marks the psychic zone nearest to our bodily experience, where 'the first transformations from biological entity to psychological entity take place'.⁵⁹ It is also the psychic zone of structural trauma, of the 'unthoughtful knowledge on the borderline'⁶⁰ that is lost to our conscious, conceptual minds and that awakens through such an ontogenetic, transformational, idiosyncratic dance. It is the psychic zone that opens the borders of our bodies most profoundly towards others, and Kira O'Reilly's tentative movement along its diffuse boundaries is inevitably to some degree a shared transformation.

All of these concerns are reflected in the artist's own description of this piece:

As I performed *Stair Falling*, 17 days of daily four hour backward and aching slow fallings down a Victorian stone staircase naked, the caress of stone and skin, the effect of gravity and gaze burdened and unburdened my body. It was as much a dancing of becomings and molecular shifts as anything. It was upside-down hangings and slidings, flashings of pink bits and eye holdings, feelings and touching of irons and stone through soft leather skin gloves, hairs catching and muscles softening. Tits and arse askew.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Bracha Ettinger, 'Metramorphic Borderlines and Matrixial Borderspace', p. 134.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 138.

⁶⁰ Idem, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 77.

⁶¹ Kira O'Reilly, in Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, 'Falling Asleep with a Pig' interview with Kira O'Reilly, *Antennae. The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, 2010, no. 13: 38–48 (47).

Nude Descending

Kira O'Reilly's *Stair Falling* performance has already incited an entire trajectory of references, and writers⁶² have already compared O'Reilly's muscular body and her skin, becoming mottled over the duration of the performance, to Egon Schiele's drawings, her slow-motion descent to the filmic and photographic quality of Cindy Sherman's self-portrait series *Untitled*, but the work that provoked one of the reviewers to describe O'Reilly's piece as its 're-interpretation'⁶³ is Marcel Duchamp's 1912 painting *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (*Nu descendant un escalier n° 2*). And while from the perspective of performance studies one may well be suspicious of such claims at identification, at 'disciplining' the live work back into the canon of art history, I again propose to read this 're-interpretation' in terms of what Hal Foster suggests about trauma as the temporal model that animates the relationship of the contemporary to the historical avant-gardes. It is through the complexity of such 'traumatic' temporal dynamic that the questions addressed in Duchamp's now already canonical painting, with its 'remarkable aggregation of avant-garde concerns: the birth of cinema; the Cubists' fracturing of form; the Futurists' depiction of movement; the chromophotography [...]; and the redefinitions of time and space by scientists and philosophers'⁶⁴ open up possibilities to re-mark on some similar, but also highly different contemporary concerns that may have 'aggregated' in O'Reilly's performance.

The links between the two works begin with the obvious reference of the descending nude. In O'Reilly's case this 'nude' will nonetheless be the artist herself, tumbling down a staircase, perhaps so that her exposed, naked body may once again bring 'high class

⁶² Joanna 'Bob' Whalley and Lee Miller, 'Disorderly Looking', in Paula Orrell (ed.) *Marina Abramović and the Future of Performance Art*, London: Prestel, 2010, pp. 95–99 (99).

⁶³ Kathy Noble, 'Marina Abramović Presents...', Comment, 21st August 2009, *Frieze Magazine*, access online, available HTTP: <http://www.frieze.com/comment/article/marina_abramovic_presents>.

⁶⁴ Ann Temkin, in Sherry Babbitt (ed.) *Philadelphia Museum of Art: Handbook of the Collections*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995, p. 307.

culture all over the place' of an art gallery in an embrace of the hilariousness of the Cramps' camp reiteration of Duchamp's once equally scandalous descent of the canonical art object of the nude from its static reclining position, where it lay (ar)rested for centuries in a seemingly safe illusion that it has been pacified and mastered by the gaze. In this, O'Reilly's performative gesture is clear and not unfamiliar. It engages the by now well-established feminist strategy of blurring the distinction between the artist and the work, of exposing their mutual entanglement in its full materiality and erotic charge. But the point where the two works converge perhaps less obviously concerns the treatment of movement as a means of introducing a highly specific temporality to the work, as well as a changed attitude to eroticism and thus also to trauma, as the pathways that link us with our pleasure and pain, *jouissance* and trauma are never entirely fissured from one another.

To our contemporary vision, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* seems entirely void of eroticism. It depicts a succession of some twenty different positions of an action of descending a staircase in a manner of freeze-frames, breaking up the 'natural' movement but also blurring the individual positions of a descending figure into a fused, unfolding motion, with an outpour of angular, fractured, abstract shapes cascading down the canvas diagonally from its upper left to its bottom right corner without any definite perspectival direction, suggesting a sense of simultaneous, multidirectional time and space and rendering the anatomical nude entirely undecipherable to the eye. The artist 'discarded completely the naturalistic appearance of a nude'⁶⁵ in a highly deliberate act of disavowal both of gendered representation and of the physical side of painting. Such disavowal may in hindsight be recognised as a typically modernist celebration and embrace of abstraction, of multiplicity, of the liberation of form as a way of breaking free from the

⁶⁵ Marcel Duchamp in Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 29.

constraints of (art) history and of one's immediate environment. And indeed, Duchamp's words seem to reinforce such impression:

In the "Nude Descending a Staircase," I wanted to create a static image of movement: movement is an abstraction, a deduction articulated within the painting, without our knowing if a real person is or isn't descending an equally real staircase. Fundamentally, movement is in the eye of the spectator, who incorporates it into the painting.⁶⁶

Feminist art in particular has fiercely opposed such abstracting of gender specificity and of the context and materiality of the artwork and the artist, and O'Reilly's practice is rooted firmly in such an approach. Yet what I feel it shares with the *Nude Descending* is a particular intervention into sexuality in the field of vision through a relation between stasis and motion as a means of doing away with the 'naturalness' of vision and of linear temporality, thus shifting the affectivity of the work away from its fixation on sight. Both works intervene in the stability of the gaze, of the spectator's arresting I / eye. Just as with Duchamp '[t]he kinetic character of the nude is not merely the thematization of movement as a pictorial fact but rather the discovery that the retinal is not an essential given but a rhetorical condition',⁶⁷ O'Reilly's slow-motion descent relaxes retinal vision and although it is an entirely specific, material reconfiguring of the body through the medium of performance it shifts gender specificity and body's materiality away from any stable identifiable position. It does this, among other things, through overexposure and temporal duration, refocusing and delay, in which

the status and shape of gender is transitory. I always feel I am becoming something else, that gender slips and slides, becomes somewhat undone and redone as I move and as physicality and its tremendous permeability revolve in relation to without. This malleability is subtle and inexact; these art works are perhaps brief framings of it for an imprecise encounter.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp*, p. 30.

⁶⁸ Kira O'Reilly, in Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, 'Falling Asleep with a Pig', p. 47.

The effect of this destabilisation is both humorous and deeply disturbing, and as a challenge to any effort of the gaze to fix the body's eroticism, it shares Duchamp's concerns:

While Duchamp maintains that eroticism is the only *-ism* he believes in, it is clear that eroticism for him is not linked to an anatomical or essentialist destiny but rather, like humor, it is defined through movement, as transition instead of stasis.⁶⁹

Where the two works diverge concerns the different political stakes involved in the shifting of the art's reliance on the senses and particularly on vision. O'Reilly's work does not shun the senses for the abstraction but rather heightens and intensifies what the senses are capable of enduring. It is an examination of the body in body's own terms, or rather in terms of *jouissance* and trauma as the closest possible rapport with and awareness of the body's biological processes. The political stakes of such focus on the body, especially in relation to the modernist tradition, start with what Rebecca Schneider identifies in feminist performance as part of the feminist reversal of subject-object relations that regulate the gaze:

The contemporary feminist project to turn the eye of the visceralized, marked object back on to the detached eye of the modern attempts not simply to re-enunciate modernist horror, but to examine the terms of that horror to survey the *entire* field of her visceralization from the (space-off) perspective of the visceralized.⁷⁰

O'Reilly's examination of the visceral/ised, however, moves away from 'the terms of [the] horror' of the grasping, fixating gaze. The work employs duration to carefully soften and disengage perspectival vision and blur the distinction between the subject and the object, not through any play with reversal but in a complex act of remaining on the (traumatic) borders where heightened awareness meets abandonment, blurring the difference between our human and animal consciousness.

⁶⁹ Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp*, pp. 32–33.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Schneider, *Explicit Body in Performance*, London, New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 85–86.

No longer invested in debunking the 'plethora of patriarchal fears',⁷¹ O'Reilly's work starts in their very midst only to dissolve them and show them as equally permeable and malleable as any other attempt at severing the human away from the animal. And while the stereotypical view of performance art as involving 'a naked body doing something extreme or absurd'⁷² still hovers over any 'explicit body in performance', O'Reilly's nakedness does not seek an erotic or overtly sexual narrative to 'contain' the exposed breasts and genitalia. O'Reilly's body is exposed in a manner of a female animal, non-descript, simple in her nakedness, unconcerned and at home in her / its skin, simple in her / its concentrated focus on her / its task, fully absorbed in the straining of the muscles and the stretching of the skin. The beauty of this movement comes in the stilling of attention, in the stretch of the muscle, in the shape of the bone, the malleability of the skeletal frame, in the subtle changes and inexorable force of the moving body and our own implication in its idiosyncratic dance.

Just as Duchamp's *Nude Descending* reflects the drastic changes in modern understanding of the nature of experience and its relation to consciousness, to memory and recollection that inaugurated trauma into art and literary theory during modernism, O'Reilly's work is a profoundly material re-negotiation of our contemporary experience of the symbolic screen that shields consciousness from the traumatic real. Whereas such work is often theorised as an exploration of abjection, of 'the repressing of the maternal body said to underlie the symbolic order [through] exploit[ing] the disruptive effects of its material and / or metaphorical rem(a)inders',⁷³ the way O'Reilly 'stages' the female body that the theory has marked as the absent, traumatic 'Thing' opens up an entirely different dynamic of relations to the (female) body and to trauma, as I will argue in the following section.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 86.

⁷² Kathy Noble, 'Marina Abramović Presents...'

⁷³ Hall Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 157.

A Different Contract with the Skin

Kira O'Reilly's performances happen in the disputed ground where highly charged, deeply tabooed aspects of our embodied affectivities are activated in controlled situations of an art event, where trauma can become unattached from its situation in reality without foreclosing the entire mess of our sexual, economic, political and social, embodied relations. There is nothing easy or prescriptive about the strategies such performance employs to activate trauma in an art context. In her recent interview with Patrick Duggan,⁷⁴ O'Reilly noted some of the strategies and concerns underlying her careful and ongoing 'invoking' of the notions of trauma deliberately in her performances: 'when [something is] happening in an art context there is a real awareness of what those [notions] are formally rather than when they aren't separated from the narrative of accident or the wound'.⁷⁵ Importantly thus, O'Reilly is neither looking to represent, nor somehow embody elements of traumatic narrative in her actions. Instead, she is speaking of a precise physiological trauma that she invokes in her art, one

of breaking open the borders of the body, letting that break down happen by using a cut or, what else have I done, using leeches, something where the skin is ripped and the inside goes outside. Just on the simplest level that became a really vital art action, I suppose. To do that in an art context felt like a very exciting thing to do and a very urgent thing to do [...] and that that would invoke trauma on a whole load of levels.⁷⁶

In the interview, O'Reilly highlighted notions of deliberation, separation and acute, heightened relation as necessary strategies for engaging with the 'traumatising' as a controlled artistic gesture. In these performances, it is the most difficult separation being performed, isolating affect on the very borders of the body by focusing on the skin that is

⁷⁴ The interview was occasioned by O'Reilly's performance *Untitled* (Syncope) that took place in April 2007 at the Shunt Vaults below London Bridge Station, as part of the SPILL Festival of Performance.

⁷⁵ O'Reilly in Patrick Duggan, 'The touch and the cut: an annotated dialogue with Kira O'Reilly', p. 320.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

the locus of our most profoundly physiological and internalised notions of subjectivity-as-location.

O'Reilly has always been particularly sensitive to the context in which her actions are performed, and very careful to set her own, however simple rules that dramatically unsettle and shift the usual performer / audience contract, inviting porosity into our habitual sense of interiority of our selves, and of our sense of distance, however relative, from the performer(s) and other members of the audience. These rules include the already well-tested strategies of performing in highly intimate spaces, bringing people in close proximity to others, once again heightened by the presence of her naked, often bleeding body; however, these encounters are always sculpted and scripted in very particular terms for each individual space and each individual piece of work and it is the complex negotiation of all these elements rather than any simple proximity that brings with it the desired 'traumatising' effect of O'Reilly's work.

And while much of O'Reilly's art involves one-to-one performances where the negotiations of levels of intimacy and relation are heightened to their extreme, the effect of the physiological unsettling in her performances is never dependent on this proximity alone but rather stems from a very particular focus on the skin as the material marker of the (traumatic) borders where our psychological being touches most closely on the biological. This focus on the skin has been central to much of O'Reilly's work, it is the most consistent theme throughout the long trajectory of her practice from her early performances of opening skin by cutting or using leeches, via her more recent (and continuing) laboratory work with skin cells, expanding in the recent years to include her investigation of the political and ethical stakes in relations of humans to other animals, again examined through the materiality and complexity of their embodied relations. I would like to argue that these same concerns are present, perhaps less obviously but equally importantly, in the

pieces where this work with skin increasingly engages movement. In O'Reilly's movement practice, this 'breaking' open of her body's (naked) skin appears to have shifted through an expansion of the porosity of the body's borders through her examination of varying rhythms of breathing, through the notion of syncopation as neither stasis nor motion,⁷⁷ and through deep engagement with the body's temporality. O'Reilly's statement that 'somehow I can only do tissue culture if I am moving'⁷⁸ suggests that these practices are not separate. They are intertwined and implicated in one another, perhaps most obviously in the way her scarred skin brings the temporality of these past performances into her movement practice, but also through the awareness in her moving body of these other, microscopic movements, and her awareness that '[t]he techne is entirely cognisant of embodiment'.⁷⁹

'What if thought were as much an affair of the skin as of the brain?',⁸⁰ as Didier Anzieu asks in his book on the Skin Ego. If indeed it were, would the minute, precise cuts, gridded blood-trickling marks that open the skin in some of Kira O'Reilly's performances, but equally the 'sense of build up, of a deposit of effort, or of travel'⁸¹ that is the temporal mark on her skin of her *Stair Falling* performance, be a tentative map of a grammar, minute organs of an emergent speech of the skin?

Kathy O'Dell has theorised extensively the links between Anzieu's notion of the skin ego and a certain strand of the 1970s 'masochistic performance art'⁸² to which Kira O'Reilly's practice relates through its invoking of the 'traumatising' effect of challenging the physiological borders of the body. Much of this performance art, in O'Dell's view,

⁷⁷ Cf. Ibid, p. 317.

⁷⁸ Kira O'Reilly, reading and presentation for Textures, 6th SLSA European meeting in Riga, 16th June 2010 (unpublished).

⁷⁹ Kira O'Reilly, email exchange with author, July 2010.

⁸⁰ Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self*, trans. Chris Turner, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 9.

⁸¹ Kira O'Reilly, 'Notes for the Whitworth Gallery staircase (north)'.

⁸² Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

addressed the masochism inherent in the ego's struggle away from its support in the skin as a psychic marker of a symbiotic relationship with a mothering environment and towards the outside world. In the psychoanalytical language developed by Anzieu, skin is the psychic envelope linked to the mothering environment, a tactile envelope of 'mutual symbiotic dependency' with a mothering figure. Rather than being a metaphor for an embodied subject, the notion of the skin ego re-marks the psyche in its triple function: 'as a containing, unifying envelope for the Self; as a protective barrier for the psyche; and as a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces, a function which makes representation possible.'⁸³ Anzieu's stressing of the surface qualities of the skin ego does not preclude its function as an interface, a point of interaction between the organic and social realities. Belonging to the order of phantasy in psychoanalytic terms, the skin ego is both 'a bridge and an intermediary screen between the psyche and the body, the world and other psyches'.⁸⁴

The notion of masochism inherent in the problem of pain points to the moment when this fantasy of the common skin, of the envelope of a mothering environment, has to be suppressed in order for this primary dependency to be overcome and for the subject to 'open out' into the world. 'It is the struggle inherent in this passage,' O'Dell argues, 'that many masochistic performance artists [...] address in their work'.⁸⁵

The breach implied in this passage, the binary logic of the necessary schism from what is recognised as a 'symbiosis' of pregnancy, through birth and to the split that marks the entry into the symbolic, as theorised most extensively by Lacan, in the very point that has been challenged in Ettinger's theory of the matrixial trans-subjectivity. Rather than emphasising the breach, matrix connotes the porousness of this skin, the porousness of

⁸³ Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, p. 98.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁵ Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, p. 22.

subjectivity in the intrauterine encounter which, rather than being a symbiotic union, embodies a relation-without-relating of our first links to and awareness of another partial subjectivity. In the matrixial sphere, there is no linear passage from union to schism. In the matrixial relation-without-relating, subject is

constituted not in relation to an other-as-an-object but in relation to the trembling experience of oscillation between I and non-I in the encounter, and she cannot recognize trans-subjective-objects in any voyeuristic way. She joins the other-Encounter and witnesses the other's event: she wit(h)nesses in weaving.⁸⁶

In the light of Ettinger's theory, rather than re-marking the masochistic 'contract with the skin', O'Reilly's work may be theorised as opening and unfolding the complex material pathways that activate such matrixial limit-events and (traumatic) encounters. This work exposes aspects of our embodiment at the points where affectivity is unbound from identification, it extracts affective force from its habitual psychological and narrative context so that we are no longer locked in an identificatory relationship. In the *Stair Falling* performance, the artist achieves this through a certain formality of her highly controlled, extremely slow movement, through the practice of sustainment and total exposure to the gaze, and through her profound generosity unconcerned with anything outside the complex physiological minutiae of her task and the encounter with her audiences / wit(h)nesses. The complex experience that evolves from this encounter brings forth an awareness of the 'incremental, tiny consistencies of body shifts, skin textures altering from smooth to infinitesimally wrinkling, strata of fatty deposits shifting, lumping into areas of cellulite, drying, bulging, sagging, stiffening, many, many moments of startlingness'⁸⁷ that constitute our bodies' unacknowledged, shared eventfulness that O'Reilly tends to in this encounter.

⁸⁶ Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p. 91.

⁸⁷ Kira O'Reilly, in Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, 'Falling Asleep with a Pig', p. 47.

Conclusion

Throughout the thesis, I have been tracing a complex mesh of artistic strategies by means of which the force of traumatic affect can be engaged in different performance contexts. The works I have been analysing are by no means so easily quantifiable as the structure of my thesis may suggest. They are not sets of works about single, easily contained themes, nor are they sets of entirely separate artistic approaches, and their separation in my writing is simply telling of the necessity in this type of analysis to organise the argument around the particular features of my main subject matter. While the individual themes in the context of which I analyse traumatic affectivity – violence, displacement, memory / loss and survival; and finally the resonant body and matrixial subjectivity – very often run through a number of examples of performance practices and across individual chapters, each chapter's theme emphasises a specific aspect of possible engagement with traumatic affect in performance, and it is only in this latter respect that I propose here a certain map of the chapters' organisation based on the ways I have chosen to theorise the particular works' engagement with the force of trauma.

In the context of such a tentative map, after setting out my intentions and the directions of my research in the introductory chapter I have in the second chapter analysed how the force of traumatic affect may be unlocked in performances that place themselves in a paradigmatic relation to violence, in the sense that they emphasise a gesture of standing both in-the-place-of and *beside* the subject of violence, and thus exceed their mimetic relation to violence through a certain act of in/citation. In the third chapter, I have traced the use of this force on the examples of performances of failed inhabitations of non-viable identities, desired and made impossible through acts of violent displacement, and thus once again performances that stand both in-the-place-of and *beside* their desired subject

of belonging, exceeding the mimetic through an either unintentional or purposeful act of ghosting. The works I have analysed in the fourth chapter are concerned with loss and survival, and their strategies could be theorised as approaching the force of traumatic affect through the use of duration, engaged both as endurance and as an act of temporal marking of the absent subject, absent through death or through social exclusion. These performances engage the traumatic force through a certain shaping of traumatic absence over time, through narrative excess which empties the representational function of the narrative not by refuting it but by emphasising its role as a prosthesis for the absent subject, and / or through a (literal) placement of that absent subject in public space. In the fifth chapter, the practices I have analysed take this doubling and indeterminacy of the subject position to a body-in-site, engaging profoundly with elements of site and with architecture activated through its function as the spatial envelope for the human body, two 'women-houses' to paraphrase the late French-American artist Louise Bourgeois. In the artists' playful and uncanny 'imprecise encounters' with sites over extended durations, traumatic affectivity shapes itself through a certain 'ab-presence' or 'pres-absence', showing the seemingly obvious presence and materiality of the body as even less stable and subjectivity as even more profoundly shared, emerging from the unfolding of the performance as a living relation. The links these performances form with the mimetic function – although far from obvious – take the notion of mimesis to its very limit / threshold, where its presumed role as adequation once again gives way to a sense of blurring and merging of boundaries of two surfaces, this time of the human skin and its environment.

The works with which I have engaged in the thesis encompass a wide range of artistic practices involving some element of live or recorded performed action. All of them happen in excess of the conventions of theatre and outside of the theatre buildings, and yet in this excessiveness open up avenues for many aspects of what theatre is and can be.

And while the majority of the artists whose work I analyse would not see themselves as belonging to the tradition of theatre, their works still question and re-imagine theatre's basic premises: the relationships between performers and audiences, between words and images and the everyday, and between the 'carefully crafted artifice' and the very real emotions by which all parties in these scripted encounters are driven. My motivation in tracing what is but a small sample of this 'spillage', of the unruliness and insistence of performance in the everyday stems from a very particular focus on broken communities and their shattered geographies and memories that should not be expected to re-gather into coherent narratives and are much more poignantly re-marked in works that physically trace these new dispersed cartographies and whose structure itself overflows the limits of their particular disciplines.

Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić has portrayed the finality of the present loss of communal memory and the possibility of witness as the doubling of the catastrophe that was the scene upon which the famous Greek poet Simonides of Keos is said to have invented the art of memory, among the ruins of the house that had collapsed onto guests gathered together to celebrate a boxing victory:

Simonides, asked by the relatives to identify the victims, does not manage to do his mnemotechnical job, because suddenly the remaining walls collapse, killing him and the relatives who had come to bury their dead. The new witnesses of the scene, struck by this double misfortune, are, admittedly, in a position to identify the victims, but only those they remember from the places where they happened to be when the remaining walls collapsed. And so each one remembers and mourns his own. The other victims – not to mention the original ones – do not exist.⁸⁸

The scene Ugrešić depicts is still all too real in the Balkans, and yet imagining these new witnesses with their limited insight, both into their past and into the scope of

⁸⁸ Dubravka Ugrešić, 'The Confiscation of Memory', trans. Celia Hawkesworth, *New Left Review* 1996, no. 218: 39, cited in Petar Ramadanović, 'Simonides on the Balkans', in Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić (eds), *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*. Cambridge, Mass and London, The MIT Press, 2002, pp. 351–364 (352).

the tragedy, she is herself caught in the repetition of that collapse which has taken the poet with it, and with the poet also the hope of identifying the original victims, so that she can now only imagine the new witnesses mourning their own. But with the collapse of the omnipotence of mnemotechnics, another sort of gathering may be imagined at the scene of the catastrophe. Perhaps these new unknowing witnesses will raise their heads from their solitary mourning and acknowledge their new gathering in that rubble. Perhaps they will even share a meal there, at the site of that house whose walls had collapsed onto a scene of virility, of a feast and celebration. And with this they will already be paying their respects to the dead, for in the Balkans food has traditionally been shared at the fresh graves of the loved ones. That meal will be the performance of wit(h)nessing that I have tried to trace across the different themes and strategies used in the works I have analysed in the thesis.

At this new gathering:

we cannot hope to establish a sure way of knowing what loss it is that we negotiate here. We have to ask about historical losses, the ones that are transmitted to us without our knowing, at a level where we cannot hope to piece it together, where we are, at a psychic level, left in pieces, pieces that might be linked together in some way, but will not fully “bind” the affect.⁸⁹

The abandoning of hope of fully binding affect and of ‘a sure way of knowing’ creates new configurations of affectivity and a different sense of relating to historical losses, where such performances of wit(h)nessing and sharing may happen. It is important to maintain that this shared meal is spread onto the rubble beneath which the dead remain, beneath which the loss will always be there. The performance of wit(h)nessing both acknowledges and shapes that unknown loss as relation. But for that to happen, these new witnesses must first raise their heads and acknowledge their gathering. That is the most difficult

⁸⁹ Judith Butler in ‘Bracha’s Eurydice’, foreword to *Matrixial Borderspace*, p. viii.

task, for these heads are all the more lowered for the shame of being 'left in pieces', and the anxiety of their not fully known loss.

This shame and anxiety may be compared to what Rolnik writes about as the vital terrorism that leaves people anesthetised, humiliated and condemned to an endless mourning, to sameness and to silence. Rolnik writes from the position of someone who personally experienced such a wounding of the most intimate desire through imprisonment and the experience of the Brazilian military dictatorship, which she was only able to overcome through a voluntary estrangement from Brazil and from her language during more than a decade spent in Paris, thinking and living in another language and culture, in what she would later recognise as a 'plaster that both contained and cohered an agonizing affective body'.⁹⁰ She writes also as someone who was eventually able to return to Brazil, insisting that 'it is always possible to bring desire back after it breaks down'⁹¹, however, that this healing, however consciously sought and actively worked with, is always a surprising occurrence and can only to some degree be a controlled process. In as much as it is impossible to predict how and when each of the lowered heads of the solitary unknowing mourners will be raised in mutual acknowledgement, the sharing that performances of wit(h)ness offers is a cultivation of an openness, it is not well suited to the traditional organisation of theatre events and functions best in projects whose structure is open and able to reach across distance and without delimiting its potential audiences. Other strategies that open this possibility of wit(h)ness include works that take place in more intimate settings or over longer periods of time; as well as works whose structure is such that they become an invitation to dialogue and a form that can sustain such dialogue even when it is difficult to 'set the stage' that would anticipate its reciprocity.

⁹⁰ Suely Rolnik, 'Deleuze, Schizoanalyst', *e-flux journal*, March 2011, no. 23, online access, available HTTP: <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/213#_ftn4>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

In my writing about trauma and wit(h)ness in the thesis I have continually shifted between three separate but interlinked positions, given by the three key questions in my research, about what might constitute an artistic response to traumatic experience; about the possible critical and writerly response to such artistic practices; and about the possible critical and writerly response to trauma itself without the mediation of another artwork. While this continual interweaving of three different writing registers as well as three parallel critical intentions surely complicates the process of engaging with my thesis, I hope that I have demonstrated convincingly that it is exactly through such a complex and ongoing interaction of these three registers that I could show my subject matter ‘in its own intelligibility or knowability’, without imposing an agenda of my own, which is not to say that I have not been firmly in control of both the dynamic of this interweaving and the resulting pattern and shape of my thesis. I also hope that I have shown with some persuasiveness how an awkward, uncomfortable presence of certain misplaced, ‘emptied’ mimetic forms of contemporary dance and performance is continually creating a parallel topography that retroacts on accepted notions of culture and renders what belongs inside or outside of the cultural sphere indeterminate and thus always potentially open to change.

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